

## 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent “No Good Deed Goes Unpunished”

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Back in the beginning of July 2012, on a particular lovely day to be swimming at a beach in Hallandale, Florida, a life guard by the name of Tomas Lopez noticed a man in danger of drowning in the water. Like any good lifeguard would, Tomas leaped into the water, swam out and rescued the man before he drowned. Instead of hailing him as a hero, however, the company he worked for as a life guard for that beach fired Tomas. Evidently, the man who needed rescuing was drowning just beyond the area of the company’s responsibility in an area marked “swim at your own risk”. And so, the company was not responsible for that man’s wellbeing. I imagine the company’s lawyers also had liability concerns about their lifeguards rescuing someone outside of their contracted “zone”. Tomas, on the other hand, had a reasonable question after being fired. “Was I supposed to let him drown?” Tomas’ coworkers of course told the company and the national media that they would have done the exact same thing. And so the company responded by firing Tomas’ coworkers as well! In time, the company realized how outrageous their policy was regarding all this. But, at the time, it was a sensational story and underscored a life lesson we all find out eventually: no good deed goes unpunished. Sometimes doing the right thing requires that we suffer for it. I mention this story because, by showing mercy and compassion to the woman caught in adultery, Jesus made some real enemies in a way unthinkable in this day and age. But it was the right thing to do. We all have moments in our life that are like that. Do we not? When doing the right thing requires a certain measure of suffering for it.

In my humble opinion, this Gospel reading of Jesus forgiving the woman caught in adultery is better matched with the story of Susanna in Daniel chapter 13. You may recall this story. The beautiful and virtuous Susanna was the wife of Joakim, a very wealthy man. While Susanna was alone one day, two elders who were also appointed judges, tried to trap Susanna by saying in effect, either you give into our unholy sensual pleasures or we will falsely accuse you of adultery, a crime that is punishable by death in Mosaic Law. Susanna would rather die than commit adultery. She makes her decision to defy the two judges’ unholy request. The two judges carry out their threat of falsely accusing her.

The prophet Daniel comes to the rescue. In one of the best court room drama episodes in the Bible, Daniel cross examines both judges and reveals to everyone gathered the two judges’ treachery. In those days, however, if you were caught falsely accusing somebody you would receive the same punishment of the crime you were falsely accusing someone. Daniel therefore put his life on the line to defend Susanna. That was no small sacrifice on Daniel’s part. But for Daniel, it was the right thing to do. In the end, of course, the two judges were found to be guilty and were promptly stoned to death. Susanna was vindicated.

Why does this story match well with the Gospel reading today? Well, what is going on? It says the scribes and Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery and made her stand in the middle. They say to Jesus, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?” The Gospel then says, “They said this to test him.” This is an important detail because the scribes and Pharisees were not there to defend the Law of Moses, they were there to trip Jesus up. If Jesus said, “yes kill her”, his Gospel of love and forgiveness would have no credibility. If Jesus said, “no let her go”, then Jesus would be caught defying the Law of Moses, and his claim to be a Rabbi worthy of following would be discredited. Unlike Susanna, the woman caught in adultery was in fact guilty of adultery. Like Susanna, however, she was being used violently by men in authority for an unholy purpose, in this instance, to discredit Jesus.

I think it can be said that Jesus is also like Susanna. He is being confronted by religious authorities who were less interested in truth and more interested in assaulting him. In another excellent biblical court room drama, any answer could land Jesus into seriously hot water. Jesus doesn’t seem concerned though. I admire that. He just keeps doodling away in the dirt like any of us would do when we are little bored with what is going on around us.

Jesus, the new Daniel, solves the whole matter with a single sentence, “Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” Silence, you could hear a pin drop. Jesus goes back to doodling in the sand. And they all went away one by one, beginning with the elders. I think this little detail, that they left beginning with the elders, could be a direct reference to the story in Daniel. These elders, in a sense, learned their lesson from what happened to the two judges when they falsely accused Susanna. If the penalty for the woman caught in adultery is death, does any one of them wish to risk the penalty God might inflict on them if they carried through with their bloody plan?

This is why I think this story may be a parable spelling out what our Lord meant when he taught us to pray, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” If we level an accusation against someone before almighty God in life, we must be really careful, for the measure with which we measure will be measured back to us. This is why, in the Gospel story, everyone dropped their rocks and left. This is also why Jesus eventually stopped doodling, straightened up, and asked her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” She replied, “No one sir.” Then Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you.” This is a remarkable and shocking statement. Daniel put his life on the line for an innocent woman. Jesus put his life on the line for a guilty one. Jesus blesses her and tells her to “Go, and from now on do not sin anymore.” If we were to stop right there, our contemplation would serve us well. However, there is something even more significant going on in our readings this Sunday if we dig a little deeper.

Now, it seems to me, that the significance of this story can be magnified if we consider how the whole human race could be that woman caught in adultery. Remember the Chosen People were wedded to God the Father through covenant after covenant. Israel, however, was also caught in the act of “adultery” on more than one occasion by

worshipping other gods and allowing depraved foreign customs to intermingle with their culture. Israel was given the law and the prophets. The leaders of Israel found ways over time to corrupt the law and kill the prophets.

And so, what is St. Paul's take on the Law of Moses? It condemns us all. In our second reading from Philippians, Paul essentially says, "I do not have any righteousness of my own based on the law. Any righteousness I can claim comes through faith in Jesus Christ." What is God's solution to the problem of sin and the condemnation it brings upon us? God in the person of Jesus Christ steps in front of the flying stones by becoming our Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. That is the power of the sacraments of the Church. Grace is conveyed to us by no merit of our own. The question for us becomes how do we live our lives in response to this grace in thought, word, and action?

I think we would be well served to ask ourselves this question: How am I called to be like Jesus in our Gospel reading? How am I called to do the right thing, even if this means taking on a measure of risk, even if this means a certain measure of suffering like the lifeguard I referred to at the beginning? It is worthwhile reflecting what this might mean for us today with the situations we might be confronted with at work, at school, in society and at home? Perhaps the best starting point, however, is to ask the question: How are we also like this woman caught in adultery? What are the sins in our lives that have us justifiably pinned to the wall awaiting the first stone to hit? In these moments, can we welcome Jesus into our hearts through our prayers and through the sacraments of the Church? Can we accept Jesus' outstretched and wounded hand to lift us out of the dirt? Can we hear him ask us, "Has no one condemned you?" Because of his passion and resurrection we can rightly say, "No one Lord, thanks to you." And Jesus says something from his heart that is shockingly remarkable, "Neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now on, sin no more."