

DIVINE FORGIVENESS AND HEALING

The Gospel for this Sunday gives us a unique story of a woman caught in adultery and how Jesus handles the whole situation. With your permission, I would like to add some details to this story, details which could very well be true, to better illustrate what the Gospel really does tell us about divine forgiveness.

A prominent business man has to make a short journey to another town to close some business deal and he takes along with him one of his trusted associates since his wife has some other plans and cannot accompany him. The deal is closed almost immediately and so they arrive home a day early as evening is turning to night. They always had a candle burning at night, but this time it was not lit. The husband suspects something amiss and once he and his friend enter the house he immediately checks their bedroom. His suspicions were true. His wife is in bed with a man! Adultery! And he has a witness, his friend, to verify it. As he explodes with righteous anger, the man somehow manages to escape. In no uncertain terms he tells his wife the consequences of her act, death by stoning! It is difficult to imagine how she spent the rest of the night, for she knew that at dawn, her husband would notify the priests.

As the sun rises, there is a small group of the town elders and priests at the door ready to drag this adulteress to her death. With little or no compassion, they drag the woman out and march her down the street to her fate. All along the street are vendors setting up their stalls for their daily business. As the small entourage passes by, the poor woman is showered with verbal abuse from all sides. She is totally degraded and ashamed to say nothing about being terrified. And no doubt in the minds of all the merchants her worst fault was to be caught in the act!

Then suddenly, as they round a corner, there is Jesus, talking with a small group. The elders and priests immediately see a real opportunity to discredit him. As they push the woman down on the ground, with righteous anger they demand Jesus to give his opinion as to whether she should be stoned or not. They had him on the horns of a dilemma: if he says stone her, where is his mercy? If he says to let her go, he is then against the Mosaic Law. With a look that would shatter the very being of anyone, he simply looks each of her accusers straight in the eye. They do not flinch. Then slowly Jesus kneels down and begins to write or doodle in the sand. The accusers are for a moment dumfounded and remain silent, but then they begin to push him for an answer. He is not moved but simply continues to draw in the sand. The accusers become more and more vocal and increasingly more rude and pushy, verging on becoming totally down-right nasty.

Suddenly without a word, Jesus rises from the sandy street. Again, looking each individual straight in the eye, he softly says: "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone." The accusers are suddenly mute. What can they say? What should they say? He has upheld the law, but what a price! The Gospel then says almost quietly, that beginning with the eldest, everyone slowly began to leave. Each one suddenly realized that if they would in any way look like they might throw a stone, they would immediately have a half dozen people there accuse them of past offenses which they could not defend. How the whole situation was suddenly turned against them. They slowly realized that all their verbal ammunition was of

no use. With that simply statement Jesus had outwitted them and now they stood there almost motionless, yet with a growing urge to get out of there as quickly as possible.

Within a very short time, Jesus was there alone with the woman. He bent down to help her rise up to stand facing him. With total love he softly asked her where her accusers were. She answered equally softly, "I have none." And with that, Jesus very softly said: "and neither do I accuse you. You may go now, and do not commit this sin again." He totally forgives her. She is speechless, not knowing what to say. Even a simple thank you is forgotten. Overwhelmed with the love of Christ, she just quietly turns and begins the walk back to her home.

But very quickly as she retraces her steps along that street she was dragged and pushed down only a short time before, her head bowed not looking right or left fearing all the cat calls and slurs, she begins to feel an eerie silence. Slowly she lifts her head and notices that as she passes stall after stall, all the vendors are suddenly busy with their backs to her. They all knew what Jesus had said, and not one of them wanted to be accused of some wrong doing they had done. Slowly she begins to walk with held high and deep down she realizes that not only has she been forgiven for her sin, but that now her dignity was also restored. It slowly begins to hit her that never again can anyone ever accuse her of what she had done, and perhaps neither could her husband ever accuse her. She is now once more a lady who can live in peace not ever again to be afraid of this day.

What happens when she arrives home, we do not know. Hopefully, she did make up with her husband and hopefully he too would be touched by the words of Christ and realize that no one would ever think less of him for taking his wife back. Time would tell, for such dramatic changes are never instant. But whatever the future, it was filled with promise.

This incident in the Gospel Life of Christ tells us much about the Sacrament of Reconciliation more commonly referred to as Confession. For many, confession is not easy. To tell a priest in the confessional how bad one has been is very humiliating. Confession should never be humiliating, humbling perhaps, but never humiliating. Confession should in fact be a joyful experience for one knows through faith that their sins will be forgiven. This episode in the Gospel tells us that not only does God forgive sins, but that he also restores the penitent's dignity. God has tremendous respect for every one of the humans he has created, each made in his image and likeness. And God understands far better than humans the true effects of the sin of Adam and Eve, namely, that everyone has a propensity to do the wrong thing.

How many mortal sins are committed each day? Actually, very few. And most of the sins people do confess are more faults than sins. For something to be a sin, it must first be something wrong, one must know that it is wrong, and then one must determine to do it anyway. That is not the way most people act. In fact most people really do try to act the best way possible. As an example, how many decide that they will deliberately lose their patience? I doubt that that has ever happened, especially when parents deal with their children! Patience is a difficult virtue to practice. But occasionally, someone does deliberately commit a serious sin. Thank God then for the Sacrament of forgiveness. It always gives humans a second chance without any limits. And once one does ask God for forgiveness, they receive so much more than that. They experience the true effect of being totally restored in God's eyes; they experience his infinite love.

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