

Fifth Sunday of Lent – 2010

St. Mary's Church

Rev. Michael A. Renninger

She asked me to come with her when she told her father.

She was 17, not married, and she was going to have a baby.

She was worried about how her dad would react to this news. He is one of those folks who seem to do everything Catholicism requires, but at the end of the day the only thing you know about them is that they are angry and mean. He went to daily mass. Said the rosary twice a day. He never ate meat on Friday, and had gone to Washington each year for the March for life.

But, she was afraid, so she wanted me to come with her when she told him.

So, that day, she told him that she was going to have a baby. He was silent, and then said, "You have shamed this family. You are no longer my daughter. Now get out."

She called him once a week. He would not answer the phone. She wrote to him – her letters came back unopened. On the day her son was born, she called him from the hospital. When she told him that he was a grandfather, he quietly said, "You have shamed us. You are not my daughter."

He died three years later of cancer. He died never seeing his grandson. He died having never seen his daughter since the day I went with her to tell him.

After he died, she came to me and said, "The thing that hurts most is this – he treated me like I was not human." He treated me like I was not human.

In today's Gospel, there is a whole crowd of people who make the same mistake.

On the surface, this seems like a fairly simple Gospel story. A woman is caught in the act of adultery. Interestingly, the other party to that adultery seems to have escaped the judgment of the crowd! The scribes and Pharisees drag her in front of Jesus, and, to heighten her humiliation, they make her stand right in the middle of the crowd. The law of Moses is very clear – if she was caught in the act of adultery, she is to be stoned. But Jesus disperses the crowd by his response – let the one among you who is without sin cast the first stone.” Once again, Jesus has avoided a trap, he has turned the tables on his accusers, he has shown us something about the forgiving nature of our God.

BUT – there is more to this story than that. If we read the story carefully, we see that the scribes and the Pharisees are NOT really interested in this woman AT ALL. Her sin is not the focus of their attention.

She is, quite simply, a prop that they are willing to use in order to carry out their bigger scheme. To them, she is not a person. They treat her as if she is not human.

What do I mean? Well, John’s Gospel tells us that they brought this woman to Jesus because “they wanted to test him, so that they could bring some charge against him.” Notice, their real goal is to point the finger of guilt AT JESUS. They find him to be such a threat, someone who is overturning most of what they thought they know about God – they just want to get rid of him, using any means necessary. They really don’t care about the woman and her sin – she is just a handy prop they can use in the bigger drama. If Jesus forgives her sin, he breaks the Law of Moses, and thus is guilty of heresy. If he encourages them to stone her, he breaks Roman law, since only the Romans could put a person to death. The scribes and Pharisees thought that they had trapped Jesus, and they did so by treating the woman as if she were not human.

But Jesus treats her like a human. He actually speaks to her. He points out that she shares the human propensity to sin that is born into every one of us. He refuses to condemn her. He invites her to change her ways, but he does so in a

way that makes it clear – in his eyes, she is not someTHING to be dismissed, she someONE to be loved, a daughter of God.

It frightens me how often we treat one another as though we were not humans. It worries me how often I find myself treating someone as if they did not matter, as if they had no dignity, as if they were not there at all.

For instance – have you ever sent an angry email to someone, and two weeks later you find yourself thinking, “Where did all of that anger come from?” I’ve often re-read my angry emails, and I realize that I would never, never, say those things to someone’s face. But the technology makes it easy for me to treat the person on the other end as if they were not human.

Have you ever used someone simply to get ahead, to achieve your goal, to make your point? Have you ever pointed the finger of accusation against someone, simply to deflect attention away from the fact that you yourself are guilty of the same thing?

Have you ever decided that someone you know, perhaps in your own family, is simply no longer worthy of your love or care, so you cut them out, and you abandon them?

Do you forget how blessed you are to have your family and friends in your life? Do you take them for granted? And, taking them for granted, do they become the unfortunate targets of your anger, frustration or impatience?

Have you decide that some people simply are not “people” at all? As you watch TV, do you pass that judgment on “The Muslims,” or “The Jews,” or “The Democrats,” or illegal immigrants, or people of varying sexual orientations? Have you decided that the unborn are not really human, that the guys on death row are not really human, that Nancy Pelosi or Glenn Beck aren’t really as human as you?

The scribes and Pharisees were willing to treat the woman as if she did not

matter. Jesus shows us that it's dangerous to follow their example. Jesus was willing to look beyond the obvious, and to see within this weak woman the wonderful presence of the living God.

Each week, you come to this altar, and you are able to see Christ in ordinary things like bread and wine. If you can see Christ here, perhaps you could work a little harder this week to see Christ in the ordinary people with whom you share your daily bread.