

Sunday Homily
Fifth Sunday of Lent C
Is 43:16-21; Phil 3:8-14; Jn 8:1-11
March 21, 2010

By Deacon Jeff Claar

“...and they made her stand in the middle.”

When was the last time we were “made to stand in the middle?” Even if it was for a good reason; an award, a recognition for a job well done, etc, it is still an uncomfortable place to be. We feel exposed, awkward, and usually we don’t know what to say. How much more exposed, awkward, and tongue-tied are we when we are “in the middle” for bad behavior?

Well, this woman in the Gospel felt all of this, and much more. She knew according to Jewish Law she could die –literally – by being made to stand in the middle for committing adultery...and at least the women here ask, “where was the man?!”

I wondered that too, so we did some research on Ancient Jewish Law. The crime of adultery could only be committed by a married woman with any man other than her husband. And actual proof of the act was necessary to establish the crime. The woman’s punishment for the crime was to be stoned to death. The same behavior by a married man was viewed as a violation of his marriage vows, but not a crime and not a reason for his wife to divorce him. In fact, there was no valid reason for a woman to divorce her husband. (see jewishencyclopedia.com)

And don’t forget the crowd; they were already gathered there to listen to Jesus teach them. They were not out for the woman; they were there because they were curious about this teacher and the radical things he was saying. But when the woman’s situation was made known to them by their Jewish leaders, they knew that the Law required them to punish her by stoning. This was just the way it was, and they would have taken part in it as expected. The Pharisees knew they had Jesus, literally, between a rock and a hard place!

Remember, Jesus was a Jew too and He knew what the Law was. The Pharisees were hoping that Jesus would say the woman did not deserve to die, the Law was wrong. That would be blasphemy, and then they could get rid of Him once and for all! But Jesus did no such thing. Jesus taught that He came to fulfill the Law, not to abolish it. What He did was what He always did; He recognized the Law and challenged them to go beyond the Law, to free themselves from the Law.

And in this simple, but tense exchange Jesus lays out before us His plan for how to treat each other. Today, this plan is taught by the Church as our doctrine of Social Justice.

Catholic Social Justice is a beautiful, nuanced approach to all of today's most pressing concerns. But the basic premise is that in all situations we are to seek to live in a just relationship with those around us. Justice is respecting the dignity of the human person and not doing anything to them to harm their dignity in any way. And when we are wronged we are to seek reconciliation and not retribution.

We are to recognize each other for who we truly are: children of God. Because we are created in the image and likeness of God, each of us, regardless of what we do or how bad we are, has a certain dignity that comes from this relationship and there is nothing we can do to lose it. God never tires of waiting for us to return to him.

With our woman in the Gospel, Jesus challenged those around her to look at themselves first, in essence to judge themselves first. He challenged them to go beyond the letter of the Law and instead of offering condemnation, offer mercy and reconciliation. By doing this they would free themselves of the Law.

Today, we too can free ourselves of the Law. We can seek reconciliation and offer mercy to those who have wronged us. We can treat each other and everyone we meet with the dignity they deserve as a child of God regardless of who they are or what they have done.

Yes, it is hard. Yes, they may not deserve it. And yes, Jesus promises that when we do this we will be the one to benefit. We will have the peace that comes from following Him even when it is the most difficult. And when we do this, we are free! We have risen above the Law and are free of its constraints. And then, and only then can we know the true peace and happiness in our lives.