



FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT
March 21st, 2010
GATHERING TIME (10-15 minutes)

Introduction to the Word:

What a hopeful image—a description of Lent as *the springtime of grace*. We hear of this grace in today's Sunday gospel which reveals God's consummate compassion for sinners. The story is welcome news for those of us who have spent the past weeks examining our seeming endless list of faults and failings—a discouraging process indeed, and one that is seldom affirming. But the hope-filled story which follows reminds us that there is an upside to our being aware of our imperfect state. The story serves as a fitting demonstration of today's theme, Jesus' compassion and mercy.

A water bearer in India was sent out to fetch water each day from the near-by river and carry it to his master's household. He carried the water in two large pots of equal size, one on each end of a pole which he balanced across the back of his neck and shoulders. While one pot was perfectly formed and was able to carry a full load of water the other had a big crack in it which meant that by the time it reached its destination, it was already half empty.

This bothered the cracked pot for quite some time until one day he told his water bearer of his shameful condition. The water bearer felt sorry for the old cracked pot and in his compassion he said, "As we return to the master's house today I want you to notice the beautiful flowers along the pathway." Sure enough, all the way from the river to the house were beautiful wild flowers to brighten the path. The water bearer said to the cracked pot, "Did you notice that the flowers were only on your side of the path; on the other side there was nothing but dirt. Some time ago I noticed your pot dripping as we walked so I scattered some flower seeds all along the path from the river to the house. All this time I have been able to adorn the master's table with these beautiful fresh flowers. Without you being what you are, cracks and all, there would never have been any flowers to brighten up your master's table or his life."

Warm-up Activity (about 8-10 minutes):

The story of the woman caught in adultery (today's gospel) is a good example of how Jesus responds to people struggling with their imperfect state, their human limitations. Jesus doesn't rebuke; he accepts and forgives. Some of the "law" figures we routinely encounter in daily life are not so forgiving. To help get into the spirit of today's readings, you are invited to respond to one or more of the following questions:

- a) What was the most lame-brain excuse you ever gave a police officer when pulled over for speeding?
- b) Talk about a time when, as a youth, you were caught red-handed doing something wrong.
- c) Were you ever falsely accused and forced to pay "the penalty?" Share your experiences.

The Table of the Word

THEME

I am about to do a *new thing*...Do you not perceive it? (Isaiah)

Paul's personal transformation captures the theme of today's readings. In his letter to the Philippians he is his normal exuberant self. He never dwells on his past. In fact, compared with knowing and being united with Christ, he considers everything in his past to be little more than rubbish. Comparing the past with the present, he describes the blessings of the past as a barren desert:

- Life in Christ is a desert transformed, like a way through a wilderness;*
- Life in Christ transforms us from people caught in sin to women and men who have been forgiven and freed;*
- Life in Christ is the new thing that God has fashioned for us. Can you perceive it?*

Paul had come to understand sin and suffering, not so much as negatives retarding his growth in faith, but as occasions for *transformation*, for *forgiveness* and for *a new life in Christ*. God is the one who is *creating something new* here; *we* are the ones who are recreated. While there is often some shame and some pain to this process of re-creation, all is quickly forgotten with the emergence of *new life* and *a new creation*. This in a nutshell is Paul's constant mindset, the radical foundation for enhancing his relationship with the Lord, and by extension, a mindset that will allow us to do the same for ourselves. Much to think about and appreciate in today's readings.

Penitential Rite

Leader: Brothers and sisters, we are now five weeks into Lent. If you have yet to “do something for Lent” today's readings are for you. They contain the promise of a fresh start—a kind of Lenten Make-over. So let us prepare ourselves now to “really listen” to the Lord through his Word and through one another.

Lord Jesus, you do not condemn us for our sins.

Lord, have mercy.

Christ Jesus, you are full of mercy and compassion,

Christ, have mercy.

Lord Jesus, you continue to do new and marvelous things for us,

Lord, have mercy.

Let us pray

(together)

*Infinite is your compassion, O God,
and gracious the pardon that Jesus offers in our sin and pain.
Gladden our hearts at the word that sends us on our way in peace; and grant that we,
empowered by his word and Spirit, may embrace as brothers and sisters every sinner who joins
us at this feast of forgiveness and homecoming. We ask this through Jesus,
who lives with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
God for ever. Amen.*

SCRIPTURE REFLECTION TIME (45 minutes)

(As Christians we believe that the **WORD** of God we hear proclaimed each Sunday is an empowering Word, and that God is present in the Word proclaimed. This is the Word that God wants us to hear today while reflecting on its significance for our lives.)

FIRST READING (Isaiah 43:16–21)

Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.

I am about to do *a new thing*; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

The wild animals will honour me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Second Reading: (Philippians: 3:8-14)

Brothers and sisters: I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith.

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.

Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. The word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

GOSPEL (John 8:1–11)

A reading from the holy gospel according to John. **Glory to you, Lord.**

Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them.

The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before the people, they said to Jesus, “Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. In the law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” They said this to test Jesus, so that they might have some charge to bring against him.

Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When the scribes and Pharisees kept on questioning him, Jesus straightened up and said to them, “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” And once again Jesus bent down and wrote on the ground.

When the scribes and Pharisees heard what Jesus had said, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him.

Jesus straightened up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” She said, “No one, sir.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.”

The gospel of the Lord. **Praise to you Lord Jesus Christ.**

(Allow five-ten minutes for quiet and for a brief reflection on a meaningful word or thought)

COMMENTARY:

Today’s feature reading is a story of the woman taken in adultery. It raises several questions, including the one that asks, How does a person commit adultery *alone*? The fact that only the woman was found guilty is an example of the gender bias of Jesus’ adversaries. The compassion of Jesus toward this endangered woman is an example of his disregard for such biases.

Dennis Hamm S.J. considers it more than an accident that the story is about a woman, and there is more to this story than gender bias (1998).

The gospels are consistent in describing Jesus as one who was very sensitive to the needs of the poor and the disadvantaged—those pushed to the margins of the community. As a consequence, the woman who stood in shame in the midst of these men was not only considered guilty of violating marital trust; she was also a marginalized woman and so was doubly vulnerable. This latter fact alone would have touched Jesus' heart of compassion.

We can be quite certain that the scribes and Pharisees were less interested in upholding the law of Moses, which called for her being stoned, than they were in trapping Jesus. They used the woman merely to accomplish their ends. If Jesus had agreed to her being stoned to death, he would have appeared to be as bloodthirsty as were those "righteous" men. If Jesus had protested her execution, he would have been seen as opposing the Mosaic Law. Jesus' accusers felt they really had him trapped.

What Jesus wrote on the ground no one knows for sure, but this subtle detail adds mystery to the story. It was Jesus' spoken words that must have stunned everyone: "*Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.*" What a brilliant judgment! Now he had them over a barrel. According to Jewish custom, the eldest should have begun the stoning. But instead, the elders were the first *to leave*. All of Jesus' accusers then gave up their challenge. Case dismissed.

The scribes and Pharisees had surely shamed the woman, using her primarily to trap Jesus. Without minimizing her sinfulness, however, Jesus showed her the respect she deserved as a human being, treating her with utmost compassion. Nor did he diminish the power of the law, telling her "*Go and sin no more!*"

Joanne Chittister (2000) would argue that this woman represents all the people we may have relegated to the margins of society. We have done this not merely by disapproving of their life styles, but because we consider them socially unacceptable. They may not measure up to our standards for a number of reasons: their racial or ethnic origin, their class or economic status, their religious or political affiliation. We may criticize them further on the grounds they are too liberal or too conservative. But the fact remains... "Jesus' love has been offered *to all*, regardless of their social status, and so must our love and forgiveness extend to all (ibid)."

Now returning to the first reading, Isaiah is describing what Jesus meant when he said: "*I am doing something new.*" And this "something new" is that God has granted us a way out of the barren deserts of our lives; we are sustained by *living* waters; we are rescued from the grasp of the evil one; in short, we are forgiven; we are now *alive in Christ*; we are saved from our own sinfulness. This is what the first reading promises. This is what the gospel reading has confirmed.

In the second reading Paul invites the reader to decide for him/herself the reality of his conversion story as he then shares his personal experience. He then describes how, even though he considered himself among the worst of sinners, his consummate faith in Jesus has now totally transformed his life. Paul has taken to heart the Gospel command to *sin no more*. Leaving behind his former life, he has launched into the "something new" that God had in store for him. He had no regrets, only gratitude and joy for this *new life in Christ* that he now *experiences* as fully his own.

In sum, Jesus is our exodus, Paul insists, our Passover from sin to freedom, and Jesus' nonjudgmental and unconditional love is our certain way out of the traps people set for us. To fully *experience life in his Spirit*, as Paul did, is *the something new* that everyone longs for—years for: “Consider not the things of the past...*See, I am doing something new.*”

(Allow about 5 – 10 minutes for the participants to react to the **Commentary** to identify a newly discovered insight or an idea newly described)

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

1. (Isaiah) “*I am about to do something new; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?*”
 - a) I think that most of us have had one or more “desert experiences” in our lifetime, a time when we felt lost or abandoned, or had lost all hope. How did you survive? What were the circumstances that helped sustain you? Looking back, does today’s Word and reflection shed any light on that experience?
 - b) Talk about a time when God made a path for you when there was did not seem to be one.
 - c) Have you ever taken a major assessment of your life, a kind of retreat to assess your values, your relationships, your accomplishments? Comment on the outcome.

2. (Philippians) “*I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.*”

There was a major change in Paul’s life after his dramatic conversion experience. Have you ever had a “eureka” moment, something a little like Paul’s description here, one that gave you a new orientation or insight? Share your experience.

3. (John) “*Let anyone without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.*”
 - a) Whatever Jesus wrote in the sand may remain unknown to us, but we want to hang onto his words: “*Let the one without sin cast the first stone.*” What would happen, do you suppose, if this resolution became a normative principle for all our interactions as members of families, or of religious communities or of parish communities? Your group is invited to comment on such possibilities. Where, do you suppose, such a humungous project might begin? Share your suggestions?
 - b) “*Love, and then do what you will!*” Says St. Augustine.

Does this not sound like Augustine is condoning sin, or does it say something more? Share your thoughts.
 - c) Talk about your general perception of sin today. Do you think people are “less sinful” today than in the past? Or have people lost a sense of sin? Or does anybody really care? Share your thoughts.

CARING-PRAYING TIME: (15-20 minutes)

1. Word for the Week:

“Consider not the things of the past. See that I am doing something new.”

2. Suggestions for the week:

Being Prayer: from Richard Rohr, *Radical Grace*, 2002. Prayer is one of those words that needs revisioning. We tend to think of it as something we *do*, but it is much more something *we are*. When we live *in union* we are in prayer, and everything we do becomes conscious, willing, and free. We still sin, but our sins do not destroy us or allow us to destroy others.

To pray, in short, is to live consciously *inside of God*. That's all. Sanctity does not mean being pious or perfect, but doing for God's sake what you used to do for your own sake. That makes all the difference

3. **Intercessions:** (Response: **Lord, hear our prayer**)

Leader: Counting everything as loss in light of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus, in that blessed name we pray.

For the Church: That all who stand before Christ, bearing a burden of guilt and sin, may hear from the church the gospel that will set them free, we pray...

For the World: That warring nations may remember no longer their former grievances or the feuds of old, but let justice spring forth and rivers of peace flow in the wilderness, we pray...

For those oppressed, afflicted or in need: That victims of abuse and oppression may move beyond the brokenness of betrayal and persevere toward healing and wholeness, we pray...

For the needs of all here present: That we who share now in the sufferings of Christ by pain and illness may come to know the power flowing from his resurrection, we pray...

For those enslaved by the mistakes and failures of the past may move forward in freedom to the new life ahead, we pray...

For the Christian assembly: That we who are continually forgiven by Christ may refrain from accusing others and share with all sinners the Lord's invitation to this Eucharistic feast, we pray...

For the suffering people of Haiti, that they will not be quickly forgotten, but rather that their plight will trigger a worldwide outpouring of all the human services needed for them to rebuild their lives, their homes, and their country we pray...

For the people who make their home in the holy land: Jews, Muslims and Christians, that mindful of a common God and a common ancestor in faith, Abraham, not give up on their quest for justice and peace, but find ways to live life together with mutual acceptance, forgiveness and love, we pray...

How can we help you in prayer this week?

Let us pray

(together)

O God, you sent your only Son

into the world not to condemn it but that we might be saved.

Before you we stand mindful of our sin and your mercy. Pardon our every fault and forgive all our sins, that in this Lenten springtime, there may burst forth in the wilderness of our hearts a song of gratitude and joy. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever. Amen..

With hands and hearts united in gratitude for God's favors on us today, we pray that all those in our influence be moved to be open to your Word and your Spirit, while we pray united as one, OUR FATHER...

Looking for a sign from God: This is it!

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