

**5th Sunday in Lent
March 21, 2010
5:30 pm liturgy**

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“You and I do not have to change in order for God to love us. But because God loves us, everything has to change.” The first sentence comes from Indian Jesuit Tony DeMello. The second sentence I’m not sure of. Sometimes I think I may have even made it up myself; I’ve used it often enough. But, in any case, both are remarkably true. And both are marvelously illustrated in today’s gospel story.

The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus signals a definitive shift in how we are to experience God. And it is this shift in how we see God to which all the prophets of Israel point. Hear Isaiah again today: “Remember not the events of the past, the things of long ago consider not; see I am doing something new!” And Isaiah is just being modest: it is not just any old “something new.” It is something so radically different, so completely unexpected, so mind-bending, that everything we thought we knew about God, about sin, about love and life itself, is turned completely upside down. It becomes inverted.

In his own life, Jesus was at such pains to show us that our notions of who God was, of how God judges, of what life is to be about were misguided.

We heard last week in Luke’s gospel of the expansive, prodigal love of a father for his two sons. No judgment, no recriminations, no “debt” to pay first, no apologies needed. A father who lives to love and forgive.

And throughout Jesus’ life, we watch him in all the gospels heal paralytics, touch the unclean, open ears and eyes to wonder. And today, we hear one of the most graphic, blunt, and compelling descriptions of God’s profligate love. A love that knows no bounds and will never give up—never, ever. You and I do not have to change in order for God to love us. God can’t stop loving! Period! That’s who Jesus says God is!

But there are always Scribes and Pharisees who delight in freezing people with their stares. “Got ‘ya!” “You’ve been caught!” “We saw you in the very act of sin—whatever sin. Now squirm a bit before we sacrifice you to the law. And in the process, we’ll trip-up the ‘goody-two-shoes’ who keeps telling everybody God forgives them. We’ll get two birds with one stone today!” And they set their trap for Jesus.

Have you never felt the shame of someone just staring at you because they caught you? It gets worse when a group forms! And they all just stare at you. But watch: here comes another inversion. Jesus will not be trapped. He reaches down and taps or writes on the sand. No one knows what he wrote,

but it is clear the writing itself is the act of God. He is seated on the Rabbi's chair in the Temple. This is no accident in John's writing. And Jesus bends over from the chair of Moses.

Remember: the finger of God writes the tablets of the Law for Moses. (And God has to write for Moses twice—just like Jesus in today's gospel.) The finger of God writes on the wall in the Book of Daniel. The finger of God reaches out to Adam in the magnificent ceiling of the Sistine chapel in the Vatican. The finger of God writes human history. It is that simple.

And the finger of God doodles before the self-righteous of this world—whether they be in the temples and synagogues of first century Palestine or scattered throughout the pews of churches in our own 21st century. God, Jesus says, is not what we make God out to be. And his impending death and resurrection will be the final blow to that notion of “sacrifice to please God.” There is no need to buy righteousness. It is all inverted! It's an up-side-down God Jesus preaches. A God of infinite mercy and love.

In John's story, Jesus calmly asks the elders to uphold the Law by throwing the first stone—assuming, of course, that the one who throws has no sin himself. Oops! And they walk away. St. Augustine captures this scene at the end poignantly: *relicti sunt duo miseria et misericordia*. There are left in

the scene only two figures: misery and mercy. The young woman and Jesus.

In a beautiful Rembrandt painting of this scene, Jesus is turning toward the elders, pointing a finger at them (that same finger of God, by the way).

But at the bottom of the frame, barely noticeable, the young woman has quietly entwined her fingers around Jesus' other hand. And he holds her hand tenderly as he asks her: "Has no one condemned you? Then neither do I." She says only three words in the whole scene: "No one, Lord." And those three words are enough.

This is who God is. And in this story, unlike so many of the other stories of forgiveness and healing where sin was always at least a question in people's mind, here this woman is clearly guilty (caught "in the very act" the Gospel tells us), and the penalty is equally clear: death by stoning. There is no ambiguity whatsoever. She is, to use a time-honored phrase, guilty as sin. And yet is completely forgiven and never stared at again by Jesus or his God. There is no stare, no penalty, no restitution. Just: go now and don't do it again!

Perhaps before Holy Week begins again, we need to change our own image of God. Maybe that's part of Lent too.

You and I do not need to change in order for God to love us. But

because God does love us, everything might need to change. Jesus' very own God is truly amazing. Like no one we've ever experienced before. Heed the bumper sticker! So let God be God—the real one.