

Homily: Fifth Sunday of Lent C
(*John 8:1-11*)

What is this Gospel about? Who is on trial here . . . really?

The woman caught in adultery? Jesus? The scribes and Pharisees?

Ourselves?

The woman? Clearly. She was caught in the very act of committing adultery, and not even the distance of two thousand years changes our judgment that the trust she broke (with another, who has managed to keep himself clear of this episode) is wrong. She, though she speaks only three words and none in her own defense, is clearly on trial.

But so is Jesus. It is to test Jesus, after all, that the scribes and Pharisees bring the woman to him in the first place. “Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery . . . what do you say?” If Jesus says to stone her, he affirms the religious law and proves that he is a proper Rabbi, but he would also advocate breaking Roman law, which held that only the state authorities are permitted to sentence a person to death. If he says *not* to stone her, then he seems to scorn justice and admit that the Romans have power over life and death. Either way, he brings about his own downfall, which is precisely what the scribes and Pharisees want. So he says, “let the one among you who is without sin be the first to cast a stone.”

And in saying that, he puts the scribes and Pharisees on trial. He puts not only their deceit in the docket but their self-righteousness, the power that comes from knowing that you are in the right and that the other is in the wrong. But when their unbending sense of justice is put on trial, the scribes and Pharisees realize they can no more stand before the eyes of God – before the knowledge of their *own* wrongs – than can the woman they have brought before Jesus. They have committed their own adulteries – their own sins in whatever form.

And in putting the scribes and Pharisees on trial, Jesus puts *us* on trial too, for I would wager that there is not a single person here, who has not at some time also been in their position. Each of us knows the terrible certainty that comes, when we know we are in the right. And why shouldn't we be firm, when we are right? What would become of the world, if there were no right and wrong? Good should be rewarded, and evil should be punished. But who here could stand it, if our every action were placed in the open for all to see? Who here hasn't also been in the position of the woman of the story? Standing before the accusing eyes of others mute, because in our heart the voices of the scribes and Pharisees are speaking for us? Who asks always for God's justice and never for his mercy?

The truth is, though, God never chooses *between* justice and mercy but always treats us with both. “Woman, has no one condemned you? . . . neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now on do not sin any more.” Jesus speaks the word of God to this woman and to us. In justice, he calls our sin what it is: wrong. And in mercy, he sets us free: “neither do I condemn you.” What Jesus says to the woman in the Gospel is what he says to us here today and to all, who would presume to choose between the justice of God and the mercy of God – for others and for themselves. It is the exact same message he says from the Cross, as we shall soon hear again: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

Those are the words God speaks to us. Do we dare hear them for ourselves? And if we do, what then are the words we speak to each other?