

Mercy Fifth Sunday of Lent/C March 13, 2016 9:00 AM Is 43:16-21;
Phil 3:8-14; **Jn 8:1-11** (Mercy is pure and total acceptance of oneself and everyone else,
just as we are at the moment, with great hope that we will all progress together on our way to
God.)

We have today another familiar story misnamed. Just like the prodigal son was really not about the prodigal son but about the audience, so **this story** given to us by John, at least appearing now in John's Gospel, **is really for the audience, which is the Christian believers**, the story conveyed by the evangelist for our benefit.

Now to correct things in regard to **the Law of Moses, it did not command a woman to be stoned for adultery or for anything else**. But of course the Pharisees wouldn't know that because they were not actually in touch with the actual Law of Moses. They were living in a tradition that had changed quite a bit from the time of Moses. And even if the Law as the Jews understood it required this, it was illegal because of the Roman occupation. The Romans wanted to judge things for themselves, as you might understand.

There's also something else lacking in the story because supposedly the one who was caught in the act of adultery, well where is her partner in crime? **The Law of Moses actually required males to be stoned for the violation of every single one of the Decalogue**, every law; they were all capital offenses. That was in theory, **in practice probably rarely enforced, unless someone really demanded vengeance**. The Law was actually a way of delivering a sense of satisfaction to people who felt offended. And it did so in a rather orderly way; but if there was no one there demanding satisfaction, then probably it wasn't enforced. So where is the offended husband? **It seems as if this whole thing has been staged to trap Jesus**, to provoke him into one of his many original interpretations of the Law. And he did that; he often interpreted the Law in a completely original way because he believed he knew the Lawgiver. **He tried to teach his disciples about the Lawgiver: what the Lawgiver was like, what the lawgiver's nature was, what the Lawgiver really wanted.**

And what the Lawgiver really wants is mercy—mercy. Jesus was so concerned in his own merciful way that **he chose to use this opportunity to help the very people trying to trap him**. He wanted them to see something about themselves that they weren't seeing. The spiritual insight Jesus was trying to convey is that **often people who are very angry about injustice and sin are often trying to cover over their own guilt, their sense of inadequacy, and their**

shame. Self-propelled goodness runs amok. When the rich young man came to Jesus and asked him about the greatest law, he addressed him as “Good Master,” and Jesus said, oddly, “Only God is good—**only God is good.**” **The rest of creation is on the road to God and on the road to fullness of goodness, but isn’t there yet.**

So everywhere we look there’s something wrong. There is always something wrong in ourselves, in other people, in the world, in nature, in our bodies, in our minds, in our souls. Everywhere we look there’s something wrong. **We are on the way; we are not there.** Therefore **achieving moral excellence or perfection actually backfires because it produces pride and self-importance.** And these are not moral perfections! Jesus offered many examples of this throughout his ministry.

What God desires is mercy, which means that we accept God’s love and pass it on—love freely given, freely received. Mercy is pure and total acceptance of oneself and everyone else, just as we are at the moment, with great hope that we will all progress together on our way to God. As it says in the Book of Revelation, Jesus is the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end. And we are all on the way to the end: to Jesus, to Christ the risen Lord, the end-point of all creation. But there’s great cost in this. Jesus demonstrated in life and in death that love pours itself out. Love loses itself in finding itself. Love surrenders everything to the Father. **Mercy involves surrender, forgiveness, acceptance, repentance, and a new way of living.**

Whether the elders walked away one by one because they saw they had no right to condemn this woman or whether they walked away because they were too embarrassed to cast the first stone, we do not know. But the gospel wants us to ask some questions of ourselves; we are the audience. This story is for us.

- In what way do we cast stones at others?
- How self-propelled is our goodness? Mercy is a gift. Love is a grace; it doesn’t come from us.
- Do we sense our own need for mercy?
- Do we hand on the mercy we have received?