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# The Day Misery and Mercy Met

## Biblical Reflection for 5th Sunday of Lent C

By Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

TORONTO, MARCH 16, 2010 (Zenit.org).- Today's moving Gospel story (John 8:1-11) recounts the episode of the adulterous woman in two vivid scenes: In the first, we witness a dispute between Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees concerning a woman caught in flagrant adultery who, in accordance with the prescriptions of the Book of Leviticus (20:10), was condemned to stoning. In the second scene, a brief but moving dialogue develops between Jesus and the sinful woman.

There is no other event in Jesus' life that more clearly illustrates the triumph of mercy over justice than this story. There are two intriguing aspects of the story: The first is that John's story is missing from most of the ancient Greek manuscripts, and is certainly out of place in the fourth Gospel. The language and style of the story appear to be closer to Luke's account than John's.

Unique words and phrases not common in John's Gospel include "the Mount of Olives" (8:1), "The Scribes" (8:3) and "I condemn" (8:11), all of which are more commonly found in the Synoptic Gospels. Words and phrases like "all the people" (8:2) and "the Scribes and the Pharisees" (8:3) are more common to Luke. However, despite the fact that there are Lukan words in this story, there are also non-Lukan phrases, which suggest a non-Lukan text.

On the other hand, some words in the story are not found anywhere else in the Gospels, including: "in the act" (8:4), "sinless" (8:7) and "he was left" (8:9). There is no doubt that the language of this story makes it unique within the New Testament.

Soft on sin?

Scripture scholars have felt that the early Church, which took a severe attitude toward adultery, was embarrassed by the degree of Jesus' mercy and found it a bit too much to believe. Could it be the reason why for many years, today's story was left out of the manuscripts of John's Gospel? This story was most likely circulating orally and scribes did not want this story to be lost.

An attentive reading of the story from John 8 shows that Jesus is not at all soft on sin. Rather, his compassion and pardon toward the sinner led him to challenge her "to not sin again." Jesus' stance before this woman remains a permanent call and challenge to his disciples and to the Church throughout the ages.

The second intriguing aspect of the story is that the story of the woman presents the only occasion in the entire Gospels where Jesus is shown writing on the ground. What could he have been writing -- not once, but twice? I would love to retrieve his message, and use it as a constant model of how we are to deal with sinners. His message would be the best "confession practicum" that anyone of us could take before we enter ministry.

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One tendency, which takes Jesus' mercy out of context, would be to stifle such merciful gestures, claiming that Jesus is too easy with sinners. Another tendency would be to completely deny the existence of sin, the necessity of conversion and the gift of God's forgiveness. Neither tendency is correct. To deny our proneness to sin, and our openness to God's grace and forgiveness is to deny the message of Jesus Christ.

As pastoral ministers and adult Catholics, we have an enormous role to play in determining which tendency will prevail. We are each invited to pass on the tradition of a Church and a faith community remarkable for its clarity, tenderness and mercy.

### Quality and extent of forgiveness

As we near Holy Week and the final struggle of the Lord Jesus, he is becoming more and more embroiled in a contest with the local authorities, and becomes a growing threat to their authority. Next Sunday, we will see to where the conundrum leads -- to Calvary and the cross. Today's Gospel demonstrates in a particular and dramatic way the quality and extent of divine forgiveness. The sin may be terrible, but sinners are always loved.

The woman caught in adultery is brought before Jesus by the scribes and Pharisees in order to force him to give judgment on the basis of the Mosaic Law. Jesus' first reply to the woman's accusers, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her," gives us an insight into his realistic understanding of the human condition, beginning with that of his questioners who began to drift away one by one. We also observe Jesus' profound humanity in his treatment of the unfortunate woman, of whose sins he certainly disapproved, for he said to her, "Go and do not sin again." Jesus did not crush her under the weight of a condemnation without appeal.

### And two were left

To recognize and bring out the sin in others means also recognizing oneself as a sinner, and in need of God's boundless mercy. To preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ without acknowledging the necessity of profound personal conversion and the free gift of God's mercy is to deny the central Christian message of conversion.

In his magnificent commentary on St. John's Gospel (Io. Ev. tract 33, 5), St. Augustine writes: "The Lord, in his response, neither failed to respect the law nor departed from his meekness." Augustine added that with these words, Jesus obliged the accusers to look into themselves, to examine themselves to see whether they too were sinners. Thus, "pierced through as if by a dart as big as a beam, one after another, they all withdrew."

When they had all left, Jesus remained alone with the woman. It is a poignant and provocative scene, described beautifully by Augustine with the words: "relicti sunt duo, misera et misericordia" (and two were left, the wretched one, and mercy). I remember how moved I was in reading Augustine's words while I was studying John's Gospel at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome.

The one who had bent down to write in the dust, raised his eyes and met those of the woman. He did not ask for explanations. Is it not ironic when he asked the woman: "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" (v 10). Jesus' reply was overwhelming: "Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again" (v 11). Again, St. Augustine observed: "The Lord did also condemn, but condemned sins, not man. For if he were a patron of sin, he would say, 'neither will I condemn you; go, live as you will; be secure in my deliverance; however much you sin, I will deliver you from all punishment.' He said not this" (Io Ev. tract. 33, 6).

Our real enemy is attachment to sin, which can lead us to failure in our lives. Jesus sent the adulterous woman away with this recommendation: "Go, and do not sin again." He forgives her so that "from now on" she will sin no more. Only divine forgiveness and divine love received with an open and sincere heart give us the

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strength to resist evil and "to sin no more," to let ourselves be struck by God's love so that it becomes our strength. Jesus' attitude becomes a model to follow for every community, which is called to place love and forgiveness at the center of its life.

### Struggling for forgiveness

Who are we at this moment in our journey? There is so much misery in our world and in our Church, and both the world and the Church desperately need the experience of Mercy -- in merciful communities, and merciful, compassionate people. But this mercy is not a watering down of the Gospel message. Rather it is God's tough love for us, a love worth struggling for each day.

Let me leave you with this quote from Sister Helen Prejean's best selling book "Dead Man Walking." It is particularly appropriate in light of today's Gospel, and of our Lenten journey, for it highlights our daily struggle for forgiveness and reconciliation that lies at the heart of the Christian life.

Sister Prejean wrote: "Lloyd LeBlanc has told me that he would have been content with imprisonment for Patrick Sonnier [who murdered LeBlanc's son]. He went to the execution, he says, not for revenge, but hoping for an apology.

"Patrick Sonnier had not disappointed him. Before sitting in the electric chair he had said, 'Mr. LeBlanc, I want to ask your forgiveness for what me and Eddie done,' and Lloyd LeBlanc had nodded his head, signaling a forgiveness he had already given.

"He says that when he arrived with sheriff's deputies there in the cane field to identify his son, he had knelt by his boy -- 'laying down there with his two little eyes sticking out like bullets' -- and prayed the Our Father. And when he came to the words: 'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us,' he had not halted or equivocated, and he said, 'Whoever did this, I forgive them.'

"But he acknowledged that it's a struggle to overcome the feelings of bitterness and revenge that well up, especially as he remembers David's birthday year by year and loses him all over again: David at 20, David at 25, David getting married, David standing at the back door with his little ones clustered around his knees, grown-up David, a man like himself, whom he will never know.

"Forgiveness is never going to be easy. Each day it must be prayed for and struggled for and won." (Dead Man Walking pp. 244-245 New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1993)

[The readings for the Fifth Sunday of Lent are Isaiah 43:16-21; Philippians 3:8-14; and John 8:1-11]

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For those using Year A Readings for the Catechumenate (RCIA): "If Only You Had Been There"

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