

Last week, we heard the parable of the Prodigal Son. Jesus used this parable to help explain God's Divine mercy, and how both sinners and the self-righteous approach this mercy. Both sinner and self-righteous are marked by a turning in on the self. Neither could really understand the Father's love because they were too self-interested. The younger son turned in on himself by taking his inheritance and squandered it. The older son, did so by following the father's laws, but only for the sake of receiving some future reward, not because he loved the father.

This week, we see God's forgiveness become a reality in this real-life encounter of Jesus with the woman caught in adultery. Jesus puts in to practice what he was preaching. The self-righteous scribes and Pharisees come before Jesus to test him. They ask him to make a choice. "Forgive this woman, as you have been preaching, and in doing so, defy the law of Moses, or adhere the Law of Moses, and reveal yourself as a hypocrite." That is the trap that has been laid. The Pharisees and scribes seem to have created a win-win situation for themselves. Jesus either goes away as a hypocrite, or he is proven to be against the Mosaic law.

But Jesus turns the whole situation around when he suggests that the one without sin throw the first stone. The hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees is now revealed. The scribes and Pharisees condemn those who don't obey the Mosaic law, but they themselves are guilty of violating the same law. Their intent in testing Jesus has nothing to do with love of God, and, in fact, it even has very little to do with the woman. It was about putting an end to this preaching of forgiveness.

The reason why Jesus' message of forgiveness was so difficult for the Pharisees to understand was because they themselves had never truly experienced the forgiveness and love of God. Their notion of the law was simply those things they were obliged to do or not do. To their credit, they did these things, but not to grow closer to God, and certainly not motivated by love. No, they did these things in order to prove themselves to be self-righteous. So, naturally when they caught someone in sin, they insisted on the prescribed penalty. For them, there was no room for any love or mercy, because like the older son in last week's parable, they lived not as sons and daughters of God but as slaves of a severe master.

Now, here a spiritual principle becomes clear. When we do all the right things, all the things God asks of us, but we do them for the wrong reason, we don't grow closer to God. Let me illustrate this for you. Have you ever followed a rule simply for the sake of following the rule, hoping you will get some future benefit. What happens when we do this? Do we grow in love and charity? No, we become resentful. We begin to point out the faults of others, often times faults that we ourselves share, but have had the fortune to not have been caught doing. This happens all the time, right? Mom says no cookies before dinner. And inevitably one of the kids grabs a cookie anyway. The other siblings immediately report this, waiting for justice to be served. Now, how many times have the other sibling disobeyed mom and dad? Or, to take it a step further, how far were the other siblings into devising their own plans to sneak a cookie before catching the one who managed to do so successfully?

It's this attitude that makes today's Gospel is so important. When we find ourselves merciless with others, it's almost always a cover for our own sinfulness. As human beings we tend to mask our own sin by scapegoating others. The problem

with scapegoating is that it doesn't work. Sacrificing the scapegoat never really solves the problem, in fact, it often leads to further sin. I wonder if the tragedy of abortion, and the pain it has caused in the lives of so many people, would have ever arisen with such great force if our society would not have turned women caught pregnant and out of wedlock into scapegoats, but instead would have shown them mercy and compassion, while at the same time telling them (and the men) to sin no more.

Scapegoating is simply easy way out. It never asks us to look inward at our own sinfulness, at the sinfulness of the structures of our own society. Instead it simply places the blame for the negative consequences of sin solely on one person or group of people. That is what Christ is condemning in today's Gospel. It's this attitude of scapegoating our problems and those of the world at large on to others without taking note of our own sinfulness that Christ is condemning.

As Christians, we are called to recognize our own sinfulness. We are called to look first at the sin in our own lives, not in the lives of others. Over the past few months I have constantly heard complaints about the NY State legislature, and all the mess that they are creating, the corruption, scandals, etc. Now I am not suggesting that the sin in our government is not real. But I often wonder if the reason I hear some much about politicians and their sins, has something to do with the fact that it's a lot easier for us to point the finger at them, to publicly scold them than it is for us to look at our own lives, and our own sinfulness. See, it's so easy for us to be like the scribes and Pharisees, isn't it? It's so easy for us to complain about how others waste taxpayer money, while ignoring the way in which we use our own wealth on wasteful things rather than for building the Kingdom of God. Its so easy for us to condemn Tiger Woods, rather than to explore the ways in which we have failed to live lives of purity and chastity.

Thanks be to God that Jesus doesn't play this game. Jesus does not join in the scapegoating mob, the mob that is unwilling to look at its own sin and instead seeks vindictive violence on others. Instead, Jesus is the one who tells us to look at our own sinfulness, and to "Go and sin no more." Being a Christian is not about scolding others for their sins. It's about looking at our own sins and the damage they have caused in our lives, and seeking forgiveness for them. Only after we have done that, can we then help others repent from their sins. The reason is because until we have experienced God's mercy and forgiveness, we cannot be vessels of God's mercy. This is yet another reason our sacraments are so important. They allow us to experience God's forgiveness.

When we experience God's love and forgiveness, we don't become self-righteous like the scribes and Pharisees. Rather, we become grateful. We are marked by gratitude, because we recognize that, like the adulterous woman, we too have been caught in the very act of sinning, and we too have heard the voice of Jesus say "Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more." The gratitude we have for this gift of forgiveness, leads us in the opposite direction of scapegoating. It does not cause us to condemn others, for we too are guilty of violating the same laws, but to help others understand that they too can be forgiven of their sins, that they too can repent and hear Jesus say, "Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more."

Brothers and Sisters, peace to you, and to all who follow Christ.