

Homily for the 5th Sunday of Lent, Year C

April 6, 2025

St. Bavo Parish

Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.

First Reading: Isaiah 43:16-21 (Remember not the events of the past.)

Responsory: Psalm 126 (The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy.)

Second Reading: Philippians 3:8-14 (I consider everything as a loss, because of the supreme good of knowing Christ.)

Gospel: John 8:1-11 (Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone.)

It seems a bit odd to hear a passage from the Old Testament in which God tells his people to *forget the past*. Usually, the Scriptures exhort the Jewish people to look back on the marvels that God has done for them and, “Remember the mighty deeds of the Lord!” However, there are certain inflection points in salvation history when the Lord’s message to his people was different: “Remember *not* the events of the past, the things of long ago consider not; see, I am doing *something new!*” That “something new” was when God intervened in a dramatic way to rescue his people from one form of slavery or another. The first came when Moses announced to the Hebrews enslaved in Egypt that the Lord had seen their suffering, and he was going to lead them to freedom in the Promised Land. The second came at the end of the Babylonian Exile, when the Prophet Isaiah announced that the Lord was going to lead his people back home to rebuild their society. And the third came when God sent his Son into the world to set all humankind free from their slavery to sin and death. Each time, the people had to, “forget what lies behind and strain forward to what lies ahead,” as Paul exhorted the Philippians to do.

In the case of the Babylonian Exile, there was a tremendous amount of suffering that needed to be reconciled. God and his people needed to put the trauma behind them in order to move forward together. Isaiah’s prophecy could be an exhortation to the Jewish people to *forgive God* for abandoning them to their enemies, allowing their nation to be crushed and their people to be enslaved again. Or, the Lord might be saying through the Prophet that *he is willing to forgive* the people’s repeated infidelities, which led to their destruction. Most likely, both meanings are intended. The Lord could be lamenting the fact that the people never repented of their sins *and* that he followed through on his threat to abandon them in their hour of need. Now God is saying: “There has been too much evil, too much punishment, and too much suffering. Let’s start over, putting the past behind us and recommitting ourselves to a covenantal relationship. Be my people once again, and I will be your God once again.”

That’s how reconciliation works. While it certainly helps when the parties who cause injury can acknowledge their guilt and ask for forgiveness, the real breakthroughs come when aggrieved parties can acknowledge their *hurt* and choose to let go of any lingering pain and resentment that they still feel. Then, and *only* then, can both parties put the events behind them and heal their relationship. And, since most interpersonal conflicts involve some measure of hurtful conduct on both sides, what is often needed is a mutual apology and a shared commitment to start over. That means that both parties must choose *mercy over judgment*.

Today's gospel deals with that choice of mercy over judgment. The woman presented to Jesus has committed a very serious crime. She and her lover have been caught in the act of adultery. The situation is clear, and so is the penalty: *both the man and the woman* shall be stoned to death. However, it appears that the accusers are not really concerned about carrying out justice. Otherwise, the woman would not be standing there alone. She and her lover would be standing *together* to face the same judgment, as the law demanded. Obviously, the whole point of this exercise is *to test Jesus*. The scribes and Pharisees want to see if Jesus' compassion will get the better of him and cause him to speak against the Law of Moses in this case, where the law permits absolutely no discretion in terms of punishment. If he challenges the law, he could be condemned along with the woman. But, if he condemns her, even under these circumstances, he will call into question his own teachings about forgiveness and mercy. So, will he choose to be a lawbreaker or a hypocrite? Will he deny *justice* or deny *mercy*? As usual, when confronted with a no-win situation, Jesus finds another way, which no one anticipated. He turns the spotlight away from the woman and her sin, and puts it squarely on the people in the crowd and *their* many sins.

The Law of Moses stipulated that when a person was convicted of a crime, the accusers who testified against the criminal were entitled to carry out the prescribed sentence. So, in this case, the ones who caught the woman in adultery should be allowed to cast the first stones at her. But, Jesus turns the tables on them. Rather than questioning the woman's guilt or the justice of the death sentence, he simply demands that the first people to throw stones at her should be those who are *free from sin*. Notice, he doesn't accuse anyone of anything. He doesn't try to stop anyone from picking up a stone. He just challenges everyone in the crowd to examine their own conscience *first* and then consider whether they are *worthy* to cast judgment on someone else. Fittingly, it's the wise elders who walk away first, followed by all the rest. It appears that all of them are aware of their own guilt, but that awareness does not move them to compassion for the accused woman *until* Jesus makes that connection for them. Jesus helps them, and all of us, to see how unjust it is to *deny* mercy to someone else while hoping to *receive* mercy for ourselves.

One important detail to note in the story is that Jesus does not excuse the woman's conduct. In fact, he tells her very directly, "From now on do not sin anymore." He acknowledges her sin, but refuses to condemn her for it. That is an important distinction for us to make as we deal with our fellow sinners. It is not hypocritical to point out sin when we see it. In fact, we can do a great service to our brothers and sisters by confronting them gently and lovingly in order to turn them away from sin. However, we must always be mindful of *our own sin* and our own desire for mercy, so that we can avoid the temptation to condemn others or judge them harshly. For reconciliation and healing to take place, we must be willing to look honestly at the painful events of the past and then *reject* our urge to judge and condemn. That's not an easy thing to do, but it's the *only way* to leave resentments behind and move *forward* toward forgiveness and healing.