

I'd like to start with a word of thanks. The Kairos prison retreat was held last weekend and as usual, the Holy Spirit made an appearance. The obvious joke is that he came for the cookies, but I'll refrain. You might wonder – how does the Holy Spirit show up? Did I see any tongues of fire? No, but like using tongues of fire, the Holy Spirit likes to surprise you, really likes to stop you in your tracks and say to you, “See what I’m doing?” You need to be *aware* and expect it to happen.

In today's gospel, Jesus is put into an impossible situation, isn't he? Oh how the Pharisees must have been delighted! Here's a way to finally trap Jesus into making a decision where either outcome is damaging to the reputation of the so-called Messiah. This pathetic woman is held up to public shame and ridicule – there apparently is no doubt about her guilt – and Jesus gets to choose. He can endorse a bloody execution by stoning or show himself to be a violator of the law. She's an adulterous woman, it's a black and white situation, and Jesus is the judge.

When you go into the prison, when you meet actual inmates face to face, you are likewise placed in an impossible situation. The vast majority of these men are guilty of serious crimes – murder being a common offense – and the image they portray is often a complete endorsement of what you are thinking. Many are seedy looking, unkempt, and tattooed with alarming images. Many exude defiance, anger, aloofness and arrogance. They walk in with a wall surrounding them that is ugly and tall, topped with virtual barbed wire. The prison guards accept this image at face value, and treat the prisoners accordingly with suspicion, anxiety, and measured disdain. Ironically, the two opposing groups, inmates and guards, are forced by their circumstances to *dehumanize* each other. No one wins in such an environment. As one long-time prison chaplain told me, “This place is a monument to Satan.”

The woman caught in adultery is not a person in the eyes of the Pharisees, she is a sinner, she is an object of scorn and condemnation. There is a long tradition in the Hebrew culture of annually selecting a goat, yes, a literal scapegoat who symbolically carries the sins of the village on its back. It is cast out into the desert to a certain death, as the village cheers. This woman, in a similar fashion, has become the scapegoat for all of the lust and adultery and misogyny carried by these men who accuse her. She isn't human, she is a symbol, she is a goat, she is an animal. And Jesus, the face of God in human form, *will not be* sucked into this charade. He forces the men with

stones in their fists to face their own humanity, their own sinfulness, their own hypocrisy. “Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.”

The business of the Kairos retreat is to help the inmates find their humanity. It is a slow process. They don't trust us, they don't trust anyone. Vulnerability and openness are not valued in the prison – these traits are considered signs of weakness. Our goal is to give them a safe place to be open and vulnerable, a place of complete non-judgment, a place of smiles, laughter, music, and cookies. They're suspicious at first, but they slowly warm up – it's like watching ice cubes melt. Many of the outside volunteers tell their stories, stories of pain and betrayal, and the inmates begin to open their eyes in surprise. These outside guys aren't that different from me – why are they so happy? What's the catch? They slowly begin to notice that every outside witness story features a turning point, a nexus, a sudden realization that a decision to follow Jesus was essential to a life turned around. Could it be true?

Then Jesus straightened up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” She replied (with astonishment), “No one, sir.” Then Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now on do not sin any more.”

Each day of the retreat ratchets up the message a little more. Choices, grace, community, the nature of Jesus, the Bible, friendship, forgiveness, prayer – all are explained in simple ways, wrapped in stories of real human beings struggling for the same outcome – to find a measure of peace in today's world. By Saturday evening the inmates are stunned. Many of the men weep unashamedly, torn open by grace and the acceptance of Jesus. One man, who has been in prison for 40 years, sentenced to life at the age of 15, cannot contain his emotions – this is the first experience of family he has ever had. He was lost, but now is found, he was dead, but is alive again.

But wait, didn't this man commit a terrible crime? Yes. Didn't each of these inmates commit a terrible crime? Yes. Didn't St. Paul aid in the murder of Christians? Yes, by his own admission. Didn't that woman commit adultery? Yes. Guilty! Isn't this infuriating? What is God thinking? I, for one, cannot know the mind of God. But one thing I have come to know. *God has a very short memory.* “As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us.” (Ps 103:12)

Whatever we've done wrong, God's answer always has three parts. The first is forgiveness, the second is a challenge – sin no more – and the third is a command – GO! Go make a difference, go save someone else, go spread the good news. Jesus did not come to earth to change God's mind about us; he came to earth to change our minds about God. The devil wants division, violence, and hatred. God wants unity, peace, and love. This is the challenge for us all. If your default solution to a situation is to label, divide, separate, and create boundaries – you are on the wrong side of salvation history. But if you look for ways to unite, to find constructive ways to bring people together, to love first and ask questions later, then Jesus' words from the gospel of Mark will ring clearly in your ears – “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” (Mk 12:34)

Can you imagine how that woman felt as she walked away from Jesus that day? As one inmate said on Sunday afternoon, “I can't stop smiling!” That's what forgiveness feels like. That's what a renewed spirit feels like. That's what grace feels like. Eight of our parishioners accepted my invitation and came down to the prison Sunday afternoon to see the Kairos closing ceremony. They got to see up close and personal exactly what I've been talking about. As one person said to me, smiling wryly, “Gee, thanks, Deacon Peter, you've destroyed all my prejudices about prison inmates...” “What do you mean?” I asked. The reply? “You made me see that they're human beings, too.” That's the Holy Spirit “surprise” in action. He forces you to see the world as God does. It can be uncomfortable. It can force us to face our fears. It can rock your boat.

So, who do you see as less than human right now? What person or group would you just as soon see disappear? Immigrants? LGBTQ people? Muslims? Republicans? Democrats? People on welfare? Pro-choice people? Atheists? Prison inmates? So many labels. So many ways to be outraged. Our prayer today is simple, “Holy Spirit, please help us to drop the stones and see the person behind the label. Help us to see through the eyes of Christ. Amen.”