

Commentary on the Gospel for Mon, Mar 23rd 2015

By pairing two scriptural stories of women who are accused of adultery, the Church is inviting us, through today's liturgy, to consider the mercy of God for those who are innocent or vulnerable. At least that is a first entry point into the stories. But, in fact, the only real consistency in the stories is not the innocence of the victims, but rather, the utterly wicked act of corruption by religious leaders of the very social system that the religious community has in place to protect the innocent.

Susannah, in the first story, is innocent and wrongly accused by religious leaders (judges) whose responsibility it is to care for and protect the moral life of the members of the community. Their evil is not so much that they are licentious, lusting after the innocent wife of a respected member of the community themselves, but that they are so vicious in their jealousy, so unjust in their acting that they will stop at nothing to destroy the innocent woman who rejects them – even to taking her life as well as her reputation and (though not stressed) the reputation of the innocent husband who has been wronged by their attempt to rape his wife and then to drag her through the courts of law and public opinion.

The famous passage from the book of Daniel is one of the Hebrew texts that give a series of weights to distinct moral values: here the more egregious failure, the more serious sin is not attempted adultery, but the social injustice of condemning the vulnerable innocent – and thus undermining all relationships in the community. The list of sins is long for these men – lusting for her, raping her “spiritually” by threatening her marriage and her life, false accusation in the context of liturgy (corporate worship), and demanding the death penalty – showing no mercy. But in truth, the most serious sin is that these supposed men of God flaunt God's compassion and truth. They act as if God does not exist – they are, therefore, idolaters because they do NOT give authentic worship (of mind and action) to the Lord who names Himself in the Torah as the source of life. This is the ultimate sin – they become gods for themselves, determining who will live and who will die because it pleases or displeases them.

It is here that the real connection with the story of today's Gospel from John is found. It is only in the Lent and Easter Seasons that the two readings of the daily lectionary are intentionally connected – and that connection is more often through a theme rather than through direct echo or shading the way the Sunday first reading and Gospel often do.

The woman caught in adultery is not assumed by the reader to be innocent. Nothing in the story indicates that the religious leaders who drag her in front of Jesus are lying about the probable fact of her having sex with someone other than her legal husband, rather, we are given to understand that the reason she is dragged in front of Jesus is to trip up Jesus (God's Son). She is a pawn of these religious leaders who probably don't care about her in the least, rather they are trying to trap a rival rabbi who teaches that the command to love and mercy is the greatest commandment. Or another way we could

see this is that the commandment to honor and love God (the opposite of idolatry) is to believe that The God of Torah is real and that He cares – and to act like it. Such a believer must be loving and honest because God is and God cares. Once again, these religious leaders do not worship God. This is the apex of hypocrisy.

On this Monday of the Fifth week of Lent we are drawing near to the decision time of Holy Week. Do we believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and of Jesus – the God who reveals the Divine Self as Mercy and Justice – two expressions of the same essential attitude? This attitude requires a belief that is realized in behavior, not just pious phrases. To be genuinely just, as God is just, requires an attitude of compassionate mercy. To be merciful we must also act justly.

I find it intriguing that the secular press is seemingly shocked that a few religious leaders in the Catholic Communion do not find Pope Francis' calls to mercy and compassion appropriate. If the religious leaders in the time of the prophet Daniel and of Jesus could be confused about this message why would it not be so today as well? The real question, as we approach Easter is: Do I believe in Jesus as God? Do I act like it?

Then Jesus said: “Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more.” Jn 8.11

Eileen Burke-Sullivan - Creighton University Mission and Ministry