

THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT (2025 - C)

Today I would like to say a few words about our holy gospel. In it, Jesus gives us two important teachings, and each of these teachings requires a response from us.

The first teaching has to do with the holiness of marriage and the second has to do with God's justice. While the focus of the gospel is on the woman caught in adultery, implied is the sacredness of marriage, and while focus of the gospel is on God's mercy, implied is His justice.

That said, let's take a closer look at these two teachings, and at what they require from us.

So to begin. In the Letter to the Hebrews we find this passage: **"Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous (Heb 13:4)."**

This passage points to the fact that marriage is a holy thing. That is why we are directed to hold it in honor. Now we honor people and things out of respect for their significance and value. So why honor marriage and those who are married? How are they significant?

Well, first of all because married couples teach us many things. They teach us what it means to live for someone beyond ourselves. Out of love, married people give themselves to one another. By their lives, married persons teach us that it is in giving that we receive.

Married couples also teach us the value of commitment. They promise to be faithful to each other for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health until death parts them. This life-long commitment is the foundation for love. It is also a visible sign to the world that important things and beautiful things and magnificent things take time to make. In addition, they don't come about without hard work and determination.

Finally, married couples do something essential for the preservation and continuance of civilization. They raise and civilize children who are the next generation and the hope of every society. Without the willingness of the husband and wife to join with God in bringing new life into the world, the human race would simply die out.

So, it is for these reasons that God has said to us, **"Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled (Heb 13:4)."** More to the point, God gave this command: **"You shall not commit adultery (Ex 20:14)."**

We need to remember here that adultery is always a mortal sin, that is, it is a sin whose punishment is damnation. Why? Because it is the breaking of a sacred promise. It breaks one's vow, one's promise to be faithful for life, and that promise is the foundation of love. How can love grow once that vow has been broken and once the seeds of doubt have been sewn? Furthermore, what will happen to the children of adulterers, to children whose parents teach by their actions that faithfulness and commitment do not matter, and it's fine to break promises and to lie about the most sacred things?

It was for these reasons, that the Mosaic law imposed the death penalty on both the man and the woman who committed adultery (Lev 20:10, Deut 20:22-24). In Deuteronomy, it states this was done to **“purge the evil from the midst of you (Deut 20:24).”** For Jews, to allow this kind of behavior to exist without severe punishment would be to bring about their ultimate destruction as a people. If a hole in the dike is not repaired, the whole structure will soon fail.

Now before I say more, I would like to point out that this commandment, **“You shall not commit adultery”** is still in force. While we no longer have the death penalty for violators, adultery is still a mortal sin punishable with damnation.

Now for most people today, this teaching is hard to understand, even shocking. Why? Well think about it ... Listen to country western music. Half the songs are about someone who is cheating. Watch TV. When was the last time you saw a program where a couple was actually married? Here is my advice: Don't listen to that music or watch those programs. They will pollute your mind and leave your imagination filled with immoral images.

The fact is that we live in a culture which has completely abandoned any kind of sexual morality. If you go out when it's raining, you are going to get wet. In a similar way, living in a culture where sexual intimacy is seen as recreation and no commitment of any kind is required can't help but affect you and those you love.

It will lower your standards. It will make it easier to cheat. It will create confusion among the young. It will create strife in families when certain members demand you approve their sinful lifestyles. Furthermore, all these things will put pressure on you to simply give in and accept what everyone else is doing.

Nevertheless, our response as Catholics and followers of Jesus must be to hold the line. We have the truth and we must continue to live by it and to teach it to our children. Why? Because only the truth can set you free. Only Jesus who is the way and the truth and the life can give us true peace.

To others who do not know Him, we must speak the truth with love. There are many people today who have done things they regret because they did not know about God's plan. They may have rejected newly conceived life, or rejected their power to have children, or lived together without marriage or lived in same-sex relationships or simply been promiscuous. For their own sake, for their own peace and happiness, we need to speak to them the truth about God's teachings with regard to sexual morality.

Now the second teaching in today's gospel has to do with God's mercy, and His justice. The Pharisees who were the self-proclaimed righteous ones were incensed with Jesus. On more than one occasion, He had humiliated them by pointing out their hypocrisy.

So, they wanted revenge, and they came up with a trap for Jesus. They brought to Him a woman “caught in the very act of committing adultery.” Then they pointed out that by law, as punishment, she must be stoned to death. Then they asked, what do you have to say about this?

Now if Jesus said the law should be enforced, it would mean that all of His teachings about forgiveness and mercy and turning the other cheek and loving your enemies would go out the window. On the other hand, if He said don't enforce the law, He would be saying that the Mosaic Law, the law upon which all of Jewish society was built, should be tossed out. Either way, the Pharisees thought they had Him. There seemed no escape from the trap they had laid.

At first, Jesus said nothing. The gospel tells us He just **"bent down and began to write on the ground with His finger."** Many have wondered what He wrote. Some have suggested that He was writing down the sins of the elders.

In any event, Jesus turned the tables on the Pharisees when He at last spoke. He said, **"Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."** At first, no one did anything. Then, one by one, everyone began to leave, beginning with the elders.

No one was willing to claim total innocence. To do so would be to deny the words of the great Prophet Jeremiah who prayed that God be merciful to the people who had all sinned. In his prayer he said, **We acknowledge our wickedness, O LORD, the guilt of our fathers; indeed, we have sinned against You (Jer 14:20).** So, in the end, they all left. The trap they had so carefully planned for Jesus had failed, and they were humiliated once again.

However, that still left the woman, now alone with Jesus. Now our Lord's attention was turned to her and to her alone. Was she standing? Was she cowering before Jesus? After all, He had given the crowd permission to stone her to death. What were her thoughts? We do not know. Saint John does not tell us.

What Saint John does tell us is this. He says Jesus then spoke to the woman. He asked her, "Where are they? Has no one condemned you?" Clearly, no one had. Everyone had left, something Jesus could obviously see for Himself. So why ask her?

Perhaps it was to provoke in her reflection on what she had done. She had broken the commandment and committed the sin of adultery. Perhaps she was not all that sorry. However, in answer to Jesus she said, "No one sir." No one has condemned me. It's interesting that the Greek has the word "Κυριε" here which means Lord. So a better translation of the woman's response is "No one Lord." Maybe Jesus asked her this to elicit an acknowledgment of His lordship over here.

Our Lord then said to her, "Neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now on do not sin again." Notice that Jesus did not say, "Oh, no big deal. It wasn't so bad." Rather, His response was both stern and merciful. Implied in His response is this idea: I will not condemn you this time, but stop sinning because if you do, there will be consequences.

So in the face of this, what should be our response to sin? We must be both just and merciful. Just in that we call sin what it is and not minimize it. Adulterers and fornicators and sodomites do sin. Yet, merciful and understanding because we too have sinned.

Finally, if we have sinned, let us seek the Lord's mercy in confession, and then after that do what Jesus told the woman to do, **"Go, and from now on do not sin any more."** Amen.