

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent – April 7, 2019  
St. Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA  
Fr. Michael Renninger

“Karl did it!”

My mother looked so disappointed. She had made chocolate chip cookies that morning. She wanted to give a homemade treat to our new neighbors. She left the cookies on a rack to cool, and told us, “If you want to keep your fingers, don’t touch those cookies!”

Then she went to the store. By the time she got back, half the cookies were gone. She asked, “who ate the cookies?” I quickly pointed to my brother and said, “Karl did it!”

It was easy for mom to believe me, because Karl still had chocolate all over his face. He was clearly guilty.

He was sent to his room... for a year... or something like that.

My brother was mad because of his punishment. But he was also mad because he knew something that mom didn’t know. Karl knew that he was not the only person in the family who had eaten cookies. Karl knew that his older brother, the future priest, had eaten cookies too (I had eaten MORE of them than he did)!

We were *both* guilty. But to hide my own guilt, I pointed the finger of accusation at Karl. Did I feel guilty back then? Absolutely not!

Do I regret it now? Yes. Because, sadly, I still make this mistake.

Which brings me to today’s Gospel. You’ve heard this story before, of Jesus and the crowd and the woman caught in adultery.

As times, I identify with different people in the story, especially as I get older.

Is that true for you too? Perhaps there have been times in your life when you identified with the woman – maybe you have felt as if others were accusing you, demanding punishment upon you, since you had done something wrong. Perhaps you’ve felt shamed.

Or, maybe you’ve felt like the same woman at the *end* of the story – amazed that someone in your life, that GOD, does not accuse you, but rather forgives you.

Or, maybe you’ve felt like someone who is not explicitly mentioned, but who is essential to the story. The last time I checked, it takes at least TWO people to commit adultery!

Did you notice that the man is not dragged by the crowd before Jesus? They don’t demand that the man be stoned to death, humiliated, or punished. Is he home with his

family, perhaps feeling a unique blend of guilt and relief? Have you ever felt that way, knowing that you did something wrong, but glad you got away with it?

(Maybe you felt like an older brother... you did something for which OTHERS are being punished, but you're not being punished. Whew! Ever felt like that?)

Have you ever identified with the *crowd*?

The crowd. There they are - full of judgment, and anger, and righteous indignation. There they stand - their hands full of stones, their hearts full of the conviction that God wants them to hurl punishment at this sinner. Have you ever been part of a crowd like that? Have you ever been one of those individuals, hands full of stones, ready to throw those stones at the sinner?

And then you hear Jesus' simple words - "let the one without sin cast the first stone." The irony is - Jesus IS without sin! But his hands are not full of stones for punishment. He is crouching on the ground, writing a new moral law into the earth.

"Let the one without sin be the first to hurl the stone that will end this woman's life." Has the Lord ever said that to you? Just when you were ready to hurl accusation and punishment at someone, the Lord writes something new into the sand of your life, and you realize, "I'm a sinner too....maybe I'm not in a position to throw stones." ("I ate the cookies too. Can I really throw accusations at my brother?")

The people in the crowd learn their lesson. They drop their stones, and walk away with empty hands, but hearts full of a new understanding. The stones get left in the street, and the woman is sent forth with two things - the assurance of God's forgiveness, and a reminder that forgiveness is NOT permission to keep doing what is wrong. Jesus says, "Go and sin no more." She learns her lesson, and so does the crowd.

Or... do they? The crowd does, indeed, drop its stones in the street. But later in the New Testament, a crowd reappears with rocks in their hands. And this time, they *throw* them! The New Testament tells *two* stories about a crowd with stones in its hands. There is this one, where Jesus convinces them to drop their stones.

But, in the *Acts of the Apostles*, a crowd comes back. This time, they are mad at Saint Stephen for preaching about Jesus. Their hearts are full of anger, judgment, confidence that they know exactly what God wants. And this time, in the *Acts of the Apostles*, they don't drop their stones. They throw them. Right at Stephen. And he is killed - the first martyr of the Christian church.

Jesus taught the crowd a lesson in the Gospel - they dropped their stones. But in *Acts*, they forget what they were taught, and they stone Stephen to death. How could human beings forget what the Lord taught them?

Perhaps this is where we discover the deepest truth of today's Gospel. Jesus forgave the woman who was caught in adultery. But on the Cross, Jesus also died to bring forgiveness to the folks who had stones in their hands.

He does not condemn the sinful woman. He does not condemn the rock-carrying crowd. Nor does he condemn the Roman soldiers who nail him to the cross. And he does not condemn you.

Jesus wants ALL OF US to know that he has not come to condemn us, even when we forget the most basic lessons that he taught us. He has not come with anger and indignation, even when we seem to make the same mistakes over and over again.

He was not sent from heaven in order to place a crushing weight of guilt and shame upon human beings who *sometimes* learn the lesson, and then later pick up the same heavy stones of human weakness that he taught us to set down.

“Let the one without sin cast the first stone.” We've all heard those words of Jesus. And yet, we sinners still throw stones around.

- + A little boy who ate cookies accuses his brother of doing the same thing...
- + An attorney general calls for the governor to resign because of his yearbook photos, and then he has to admit that he himself wore blackface...
- + A famous football team owner demands a 'higher moral standard' from players and coaches, and then gets arrested in a prostitution sting...
- + A famous archbishop spends years denouncing priests who abuse children, and then we find out that he himself had been doing the same thing...

Lots of sinners, with lots of stones in our hands.

And where is Jesus? He's kneeling on the ground, etching a new moral law into the sand. He is writing words like *forgiveness, mercy, trust* into our hearts. He is writing *patience, persistence, prayer* into our bodies. He is writing *justice, humility, love* into our souls.

And the best news? He will stay there, patiently writing and constantly forgiving, for as long as it takes us to finally, finally believe him, and finally, finally trust him when he says, “I don't condemn you. Now go and sin no more.”