

“Let the one among you who is without sin cast the first stone.”

In today's gospel, Jesus repeats his criticism of the “hard line” against sinners held by the scribes and Pharisees. Recall the gospel from last Sunday, the parable of the loving father and the “clueless sons” (as I call them). This is the third of the three parables of mercy that make up Luke 15. These three parables are Jesus' response to the scribes and Pharisees complaint that he “welcomes sinners and eats with them” (15:2).

In today's gospel Jesus is the prime actor. He has apparently spent the night praying on the Mount of Olives. The scene unfolds in the Temple where according to John's gospel Jesus has been teaching. While he is teaching the scribes and Pharisees bring to him a woman caught in act of committing adultery. They question Jesus about how she ought to be punished—not because they didn't know the Jewish law but to “test him so that they could have some charge to bring against him” (8:6). According to the Law given by God to Moses, the penalty for adultery was stoning to death. Jesus refuses to respond to their question. Rather he bends down and writes on the ground. The questioners miss Jesus' body language. They continue to question Jesus. He doesn't answer them. However, when he does speak he challenges them in words that are as familiar and oft quoted as any of Jesus sayings: “Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her” (8:7b). This is the perfect comeback for one who is hot with indignation at someone else's sin. It reminds us that we all have sins to answer for and therefore reasons to sympathize when we meet another sinner.

Credit the scribes and Pharisees with appreciating Jesus' point: if sin is to be punished, then their sins deserve as punishment as anyone else's. In other words of Jesus: “the measure with which you measure out will in return be measured out to you” (Luke 6:38, and parallels, Matt. 7:2 and Mark 4:24).

The accusers gradually leave without having thrown even one stone, though I'd guess many of them had stones in hand. Jesus then addresses the woman: “woman where are they? Has no one condemned you?” “No one sir.” Then Jesus says, “Neither do I condemn you. Go [and] from now on do not sin anymore” (8:10-11).

Jesus reminds us to distinguish between the sin and the sinner. We might sum up the teaching of this parable in another common saying, Jesus “loves the sinner and hates the sin” (in that he doesn't deny the woman has sinned and needs to repent).