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April 7, 2019

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Hell hath no fury like a mob riled up by demagogues. Some well-placed, hateful words can stir up ferocious shouts and actions that few of the people involved would perform singly or in moments of rational thinking. When mob action confers anonymity on hurting individuals, they can end up doing things that are ultimately as self-destructive as they are offensive. Like a gang of playground bullies, individuals can lose touch with their moral sense.

Mass action can generate feelings of indisputable righteousness and unanimity even when the participants' behavior is contemptible, and their unity is built on nothing more than a shared enmity. Although phrases like mob psychology came into vogue in the 20th century, the reality is as old as civilization. It happened in the Roman colosseum in the first century; in the sixteenth century Spanish Inquisition; in the Salem witch hunts of the 1690s; in 1965, when police let loose their dogs on marchers in Selma; and in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017.

Today's Gospel story of the woman accused of adultery is one of two Christian Scripture accounts of a throng involved in a lynching. (Not counting the crowd that cried: "Crucify him!") It should come as no surprise that in the Christian story, this apparently guilty woman was forgiven, and the Acts of the Apostles tells us that the innocent Stephen was stoned by the crowd.

What are we to learn from the story of the officious rabble that dragged the accused adulteress into the middle of a circle to call on Jesus to act as a judge? The whole scene was a setup designed to put both of them on trial. The woman was exposed in public, accused by the requisite number of witnesses, and surrounded by a hostile public. Although the crowd had already reached their verdict, the leaders attempted to force Jesus into the dilemma of disregarding either the law or mercy.

Jesus stole their thunder by interrogating the accusers. Which of them kept the law perfectly? The same law that said that an adulteress should be stoned demanded the same punishment for a rebellious child. When was the last time parents in this crowd had taken their inebriated son to the city gates to be executed?

What did Jesus accomplish by inviting the morally perfect to cast the first stone? Instead of picking up rocks, Jesus aimed at getting the crowd to come to their senses. The truth of the matter was that their vengeance would harm them as much as the woman in question. They were sustaining a social world in which forgiveness would be as rare as absolute innocence and were therefore condemning themselves to being defined forever by their worst thoughts, words and deeds.

St. Augustine comments that at the end of this story, only two were left: misery and mercy. That may summarize not just this incident but the whole of the Christian Scriptures. Humanity has developed a particular expertise at creating misery. As country singers put it, we look for love in all the wrong places.

Whether the accused woman was seeking affection or pleasure, or desperately selling her body for the sake of survival, her behavior was not designed to bring her satisfaction; she was involved in a fruitless quest. Like mansions built on sand, relationships that preclude commitment too often wound or maim the people involved as they fall apart. Deep down, she probably already knew that. All Jesus needed to offer her was mercy: "Neither do I condemn you." It was as if he told her: "Go, create something new."

In reality, the woman was easier to save than the crowd. They disappeared right after Jesus suffocated the flame of their fury with the wet blanket of honesty. But did they recognize the misery that had made them merciless? Did they learn that their readiness to condemn the sinner was rooted in their own insecurity? Did they get any hint that genuine religion encourages people to ask for and rejoice in forgiveness rather than pretending or even attempting perfection? Perhaps the most

effective thing Jesus accomplished with the crowd was to disperse them. As they went away one by one, they were left to face themselves without the reinforcement of the rabble.

Today, we suffer no dearth of scandals that can rile us up into self-righteous rage. Following the example of Pope Francis, our first question in these situations should be, “Who am I to judge?” The next and equally vital question is, “Who is suffering in this situation and what are we called to do about it?” Those questions won’t generate the cathartic unanimity of a mindless mob, but they can lead us to create communities of forgiveness and hope in which all can live and live well.

### **ISAIAH 43:16-21**

This selection from Second Isaiah might seem to contradict itself: In the course of reminding people of their history it tells them not to remember the things of the past. The point of God’s words is to awaken the people to the possibilities of their particular moment in history, to move them to believe in God’s ongoing, creative and transforming action among them.

The opening lines of today’s reading from Isaiah call up symbols of the saving events of the Exodus. They invite people to remember that the sea, the symbol of danger and chaos, is nothing in the sight of the God who opens a road through it. Other symbols remind the people that the vehicles of war, modern and frightening as they appear with their size and the din they produce, are ultimately weapons of self-destruction. (One interpretation of the demise of the Egyptian army in the Red Sea points out that while people on foot, i.e., the poor, can walk through a muddy track, horses and chariots can become irretrievably stuck in the muck.)

God says in effect: “Don’t get stuck in memory! What I did then was new then, what I am doing now responds to today.” God’s consistency is not in repeating the same things, but in continually offering salvation. In order to perceive God’s will, look to the goal of what is being called for, not the particular details. Isaiah’s people had been in exile, then God used the foreign ruler Cyrus to redeem them. Their world was being transformed. Whereas in Chapter 34, Isaiah had told them that their castles would be overgrown with thorns and become the abode of jackals and ostriches, this prophecy promises that nature will be benign, and the most disgusting animals will be content with what God gives them.

Today's selection from Isaiah reminds us that God's will to save and the divine creativity never stop. Looking to the past helps us understand how God works, what God's plans lead toward, and how difficult it has been for human beings to collaborate with God. But God's work is not finished. Whether we find ourselves in exile or invited into a new creative moment, God is at work, always calling out, "See I am doing something new!" Our task is to listen and watch carefully enough to perceive it and then be willing to be called forward.

### **PSALM 126, 1-2, 2-3, 4-5, 6**

Psalms 126, at least the verses we sing today, picks up on the theme of the reading from Isaiah and moves us forward. Our first verse recalls and celebrates the return of the exiles. Like every memory, it is selective. Forgetting the long journey, hard work and dissensions of the past, it recalls nothing more than the wonder of the restoration.

The second verse reminds us that the journey, the work and its success all came from God. Not only did God make it all possible, but the people's newfound prosperity became a sign to the rest of the world of how wondrous their God is. The third verse is a reminder that sorrow and exile are not permanent. If all that the migrants could carry into exile was seed, they would come back with the fruits of the land, having learned more than they ever hoped to learn.

As we sing Psalm 126 in response to our reading from Isaiah, we do well to consider how it fits our contemporary lives. We remember God's goodness to us historically as well as the salvific moments of our own lives. Our challenge is to sing of God's goodness with such faith and abandon that we will be ready to move forward into whatever it is that God calls forth in us now.

### **PHILIPPIANS 3:8-14**

Paul was nothing if not a fanatic about what he believed. According to the standards of the day, Paul's Jewish pedigree was sterling. He was a zealous devotee of his religion. His past, from his upbringing and education to his Roman citizenship, placed him in the category of his society's Brahmins, the self-assured, culturally superior class of his day. Yet he came to regard all of that as nothing, literally as "filth," in the light of knowing Christ Jesus as his Lord. He gave up his former status and respectability solely for the sake of gaining Christ and coming to be "found in him."

Here, as in many other places, Paul gives us an insight into his mysticism. Three particular phrases help us appreciate his religious experience: to know Christ, to gain Christ, and to be found in him.

For Paul, to know Christ was not simply a matter of acquaintance or of knowledge about him. Knowledge in the sense that Paul uses it here is an inner and mutual knowing so intimate that it describes the relationship of husband and wife. For Paul, to know Christ implied interior union with Christ. Knowing Christ is an intensely personal and ongoing relationship that affects people to the very core of their being.

Although Paul rejoices in knowing Christ, he still speaks of gaining Christ, thereby admitting that he has not reached his goal. Here Paul is using commercial language, as if knowing Christ were the only profit he sought, a most valuable possession that became the identifying characteristic of his life. For Paul, to gain Christ, while not a question of succeeding by his own efforts, is at the same time a process in which he must continually strive, letting go of previous “gains,” so that this prize may come to him ever more fully.

Finally, Paul speaks of his goal of being “found in” Christ. This phrase, expressed in a verb tense that can refer to past, present or future, offers a brief summary of Paul’s theology. Everything Paul does aims at union in Christ through the body of Christ. (See Romans and 1 Corinthians.) The one who will find him in Christ is God; when they are found in Christ, God will recognize Paul and his community as Christ’s own because of how they have become conformed to Christ. (This is a little like the boy Jesus being found in his Father’s house — a concept the Luke expands far beyond any geography or physical location.) Being “found in” Christ means to be recognized as belonging to Christ, formed in the image of Christ such that one becomes most truly who she or he is in and through relationship with Christ.

Another phrase which summarizes the message of this selection comes from verse 12. In a book titled *Philippians and Philemon*, Scripture scholars Bonnie B. Thurston and Judith M. Ryan translate this verse as, “to grasp that for which I was grasped.” Paul uses this phrase to explain that all that matters in his life comes from God’s having grasped him. All Paul hopes to do is receive God’s grasp and return the favor. This describes the reciprocal relationship he calls righteousness: being and becoming all one was meant to be in relationship with God.

## **JOHN 8:1-11**

Most scholars agree that this incident doesn't belong to the authentic Gospel of John. They base that judgment on the vocabulary and style of writing, not on any idea that the story fails to communicate a genuinely Gospel message. They suggest that it actually sounds much more like the Gospel of Luke than of John. Nevertheless, the canon of Scripture accepts it where it is in John's Gospel.

The story clearly echoes the Book of Daniel (Chapter 13) in which lecherous, peeping Tom elders falsely accuse a woman of adultery and try to blackmail her into accepting their sexual advances. But one difference is that here we have no indication that the woman dragged forth by the scribes and Pharisees was innocent. At the same time, we can't avoid the suspicion that the prosecutors who caught her in flagrante delicto had exploited their own voyeuristic opportunity — and that they probably took lascivious delight in capturing her and presenting her for a public stoning. Added to that is the problem that they seemed blithely indifferent about the man involved in what is, by definition, a shared experience.

Self-righteous protests like this might lead to serious questions about the motivation of the accusers. What incited people to be so zealous and avid to punish the woman? A theory developed by the philosopher René Girard and popularized by theologian James Alison is that when a group lacks genuine unity or meaning, they can achieve accord and importance by scapegoating someone. They accuse a person of wrongdoing, contagious emotion whips everything to a frenzy, and the whole group reaches a catharsis through the act of punishment. They thus create unity among themselves because they have supposedly protected their identity and values.

Our Gospel indicates that the protagonists in the story were up to no good. Whether or not they were genuinely offended and wanted to punish the adulteress, they were using her as a pawn to checkmate Jesus. Nothing about the incident gives the impression that they were seeking truth or God's merciful love. (Later in this Gospel, crowds like this will twice be ready to stone Jesus himself.)

Preachers, scholars and people in the pews have speculated for thousands of years about what Jesus wrote on the ground. One suggestion is that he was playing the prophet, mimicking Jeremiah 17:13 which declared: "All that forsake thee shall be ashamed, and they that depart from me shall be written in the earth because they have forsaken the Lord" (King James Version translation).

Whatever Jesus wrote, it failed to dissuade the crowd. But rather than question the woman, he turned to the accusers and dared them to proclaim their own purity or innocence. There's nothing like a well-placed, ironic invitation to expose the shallowness of a mob! Just imagine the look on Jesus' face as he said, "Let the one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." (That command reframed Deuteronomy 17:7 which legislated that witnesses to a sin should be the first to cast a stone.)

Jesus knew that while accusing another can elicit feelings of superiority, there are few people so self-unaware and shameless that they would claim perfect innocence in the presence of their neighbors. And if that were Jesus' opening gambit, dread of what he might say next must have been part of what dispersed the entire crowd.

This Gospel incident reminds us that we can choose mercy over misery. Judgment of others is ultimately a weapon of self-destruction as it involves us in creating a world too harsh for fallible people to thrive in. Jesus' mercy is not laissez-faire, afraid to make any moral judgment, it simply concentrates more on potential than on the past.

As Isaiah says, God is all about creating something new. That goes for all of us.

## **Planning: Fourth Sunday of Lent**

By Lawrence Mick

If you are using the Cycle C readings today, the first reading includes this strong proclamation: "Remember not the events of the past, the things of long ago consider not; see, I am doing something new!" Perhaps that could be seen as a theme song for the last 50 years of our life as a church. When Pope John XXIII called the Second Vatican Council, he prayed for a new Pentecost, which suggests starting again from the beginning. The reforms of the council brought many new things into our lives, none more evident than the new liturgy.

But that quote from Isaiah was proclaimed long before Vatican II, centuries before the Gospels were written. God is always trying to create anew, to change things to bring them more in accord with God's will from the beginning of creation. So we need to ask ourselves what newness is proclaimed in the Scriptures and especially,

in the Gospels, which recount the life, ministry, death and resurrection of God's Son.

Of course, just what God is doing new will vary depending on the situation. In Isaiah's time, the newness was focused on the restoration of Israel after the exile. In our time, it was focused on the renewal mandated by Vatican II.

More importantly, though, is the newness that was revealed in Jesus. Pope Francis has been helping us see how new and unexpected Jesus' message was. And that message revolves around mercy. Jesus revealed a face of God that was striking, and even scandalous to many of his day. And that view of God is still rejected by many today, including many who call themselves Christians, even by some bishops and cardinals who oppose Francis. Some people are more comfortable with a judging and condemning God because that matches the way we tend to deal with others, especially those who offend us or differ from us. The woman caught in adultery in today's Gospel account experienced the mercy of God and a new lease on life.

The newness of Jesus' message is also evident in the Cycle A readings. The theme there is newness of life, and that new life is based on God's loving mercy toward us. The prophecy of Isaiah and the raising of Lazarus both speak of the dead coming back to life, and St. Paul speaks of God giving us new life through the Holy Spirit.

So let the prayers and music and preaching this weekend point the assembly toward Easter and its promise of new life. Lift up the mercy of God and God's constant love that can defeat even the power of death. And spend some time before the liturgy immersing yourself in the readings, so that the love of God sinks into your heart. Francis says, "The name of God is mercy." Believe that and live accordingly.

## **Prayers: Fourth Sunday of Lent**

By Sue Robb\_

### **Introduction**

Today's readings are filled, not only with examples of God's abundant mercy and love, but of right living. Paul reminds us that everything outside of the pursuit of Christ is rubbish. And if we are to call ourselves followers of Christ, we must keep our focus on what lies ahead. Let us begin by letting go of our judgments and our earthly desires so we may enter into this time with our minds and hearts lifted completely to God.

## Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, when we sin, you love us back into relationship: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, when we judge others, you show us our own transgressions: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, when we cry out from the depths of our souls, you hear and answer us: Lord, have mercy.

## Prayer of the Faithful

**Presider** Let us come before God praying for the needs of our world with our minds and hearts lifted, as Paul told Philemon, to God's upward calling.

**Minister For** Pope Francis and his continued good health and strength to do the difficult work of shepherding the church toward the vision set forth by Jesus in his mission and message of mercy, we pray:

- For an awareness of the great things God has done for us; for a heightened ability to appreciate relationships over earthly treasures and desires, we pray:
- For an ability to forgive, to quickly and lovingly mend broken relationships, and to refrain from judgment and criticism, we pray:
- For safe passage for all migrants and refugees fleeing corrupt and war-torn countries, for a greater understanding of our Catholic social teaching so as to live in solidarity with the afflicted, we pray:
- For Francis' April intention: for doctors and their humanitarian collaborators who work in war zones, risking their lives to save the lives of others; for all who are sick and for their caregivers; for compassion of others' pain and suffering, we pray:
- For our deceased loved ones; for those who will die alone today; and for all who die without the faith of Christ, we pray:

**Presider** God of mercy, we lift these prayers to you, not that they will change you, but that you will change our hearts, so we may better respond to the needs of our brothers and sisters. We ask all this in the name of Jesus, our constant guide and companion. Amen.

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