A Woman Caught in Adultery (John 8:1-11)

The Gospel of the woman caught in adultery is a familiar one. A mob of burly men are set to stone a woman to death for adultery. Jewish Law is clear, “if a man commits adultery with his neighbor’s wife, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death” (Lv 20:10). And in the situation of a woman who has been violated through male aggression, the man is guilty and is to be stoned to death while the woman is set free (Dt 22:25-26). Adultery was clearly a grave sin and the Law called for purging evil from the community.

The scribes and the Pharisees brought the woman caught in adultery to Jesus and asked him whether or not it was appropriate to stone the woman per Mosaic law. They are more interested in purging Jesus from the community than in punishing any adulterer. This is particularly evident in that the male in the affair is not brought forward and has already been set free against the mandates of the Mosaic Law.

To those who cry for blood, Jesus responds, “Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her” (Jn 8:7). Jesus invites the Pharisee and scribes to forgive in much the same way that he does in the Gospel of Matthew.

Stop judging, that you may not be judged. For as you judge, so will you be judged, and the measure with which you measure will be measured out to you... How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me remove that splinter from your eye,’ while the wooden beam is in your eye? You hypocrite, remove the wooden beam from your eye first; then you will see clearly to remove the splinter from your brother’s eye (Matthew 7:1-2, 4-5).

With an eye to our own sinfulness, let us recall how we pray the Our Father. We pray for the forgiveness of our trespasses and Jesus challenges us to forgive others in turn.

The Old Testament Prophet Hosea had an adulterous wife. With unconditional love, he forgave her time and time again. “For it is mercy that I desire, not sacrifice.” (Hosea 6:6) The example goes far beyond the prophet and his wife. It shows God’s patience in dealing with the adulterous nation of Israel. Whether God is dealing with a nation or an individual, he is completely consistent.

Jesus addresses the woman caught in adultery with compassion but also with an eye to correction. He asks, “Has no one condemned you?” She replied, “No one, sir.” Then Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now on do not sin any more.”

How would you handle a similar situation? Our own sense of justice might call for punishment. Like the Law, perhaps we have a strong desire to purge evil from the community when we know something is clearly wrong. But, punishment without an eye to rehabilitation often leads to recidivism. Might there be a better way?

Harry S. Truman volunteered to serve in World War I. As a 33 old farmer, he could have easily avoided the war. Instead he chose selfless service. Truman’s National Guard Unit was sworn into the regular Army in August of 1917 as the 128th Field Artillery of the 35th Division. The unit was sent to France in 1918.

Truman was promoted to captain and took command of a new unit that had a terrible reputation. They were a bunch of misfits. Battery D included a burly group of undisciplined men. They were a risk to themselves and others in combat. By all rights, Truman could have read them the riot act in order to whip them into shape.

Instead, he extended an olive branch and encouraged them to live up to their potential. Truman worked hard to show them he cared for them and he worked them hard so that they would improve in their military proficiency. By the end of the summer, he had developed his battery into a well-functioning team. They proved to be an exemplary unit when tested in combat. ¹

¹ https://www.military.com/history/capt-harry-s-truman.html; McCullough, David: Truman