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**Church of our Lady of Good Counsel, NYC**  
**Lent 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Year C**

**April 7, 2019**  
**John 8:1-11**

Crowds can be wonderful, exhilarating; they can be fun, like the crowds lining the streets of Manhattan, cheering on the runners in a marathon race; crowds can be scary, terrifying, as well. Today's story of the woman caught in adultery warns us that there is something that goes on in a crowd, whether the crowd be large or small, about which we have to be very careful. Because crowds can become very dangerous, especially if the crowd should turn against you; if the crowd should turn into a mob, So, let's see what is going on in the scene that St. John sets before us.

The woman is kneeling on the ground, surrounded by a circle of men who are accusing her of adultery. Curiously her accomplice is nowhere to be found. The circle of accusers, the crowd, is united in their condemnation of the woman, and Jesus is dragged in to give His opinion about the matter. What is happening is that this woman has been made a "scapegoat." She has become the object of the crowd's collective hostility, and she serves for that small group a purpose of which she is totally unaware, and of which her accusers are probably unaware as well. She has been caught up in a dynamic as old as civilization, wherein people can feel relieved of their own guilt by designating another as the guilty one. The mob has turned against her.

This idea of the "scapegoat" is a theme that runs throughout the Old and New Testament, In ancient Israel, the "scapegoat" was quite literally a goat, and on the Day of Atonement, the day on which the Jews sought forgiveness of their sins, the people and the priests would assemble at the edge of the desert, and in a symbolic gesture they would place their sins upon the goat who would then be chased off into the desert. The people would then return to their everyday lives, confident that they were now rid of their sins. They had dumped their sins on the back of the goat, which had "escaped" into the wild. They had gotten their sins off their backs by putting them on the back of the goat. Those sins were no longer part of who they were; they no longer belonged to them; they were relieved of the burden, of the weight, of their own sinfulness.

Today, we might think of that is being rather primitive, even magical. But we do pretty much the same thing, when, as a group, we coalesce around some individual or individuals, who are singled out and designated as being "the problem" in some vague, usually unspecified way. In doing this the accusers can feel better about themselves, that "we" are not the problem; it's that other guy who is messing everything up. By singling out some individual or individuals, we can presume that we are taking care of

the problem. Why so often do people resort to this strategy of vilification? Because in every group---however large, however small, be it the family, the office, the playground, the nation---there are tensions, rivalries, hostilities---people are at odds with each other. And the way to diffuse these tensions, so that everyone can appear to be getting along, is to designate someone else as being "the problem."

How does it happen? In the school cafeteria some kid is bullied, some "flaw" in his appearance or demeanor is mocked and made fun of, so that the "cool" kids can feel better about themselves and by their mockery mask their own insecurities. In the workplace an under-performing team can designate the person who doesn't fit in socially with the others as the reason for the group's low productivity, when in reality he or she may contribute no less than all the others. This dynamic is played out also in our national politics. During the Cold war, it was communists who were vilified. Then, with the fall of the Berlin Wall a new "scapegoat" had to be found to forge a sense of group identity. A culture war was waged wherein it was gays and lesbians who were singled out as the problem, who were designated as the threat to family life. Of course, the real threat to family life was a consumerist approach to sexuality wherein the human body, the human person, had become a product to be marketed and disposed of like any other commodity in the American way of life. But, better not to have to deal with that reality and instead latch on to those who are "other," those who are "different," as being the problem. With a greater acceptance of gay people a new "scapegoat" had to be found. So now it is "immigrants" who carry the burden of a dysfunctional economy and the hollowing out of the middle class.

Jesus refuses to join the crowd in condemning the woman. More importantly He identifies with her because He realizes she has been set-up by this crowd of male accusers. He identifies with her because He is aware that He Himself will soon be set-up by the religious authorities of the Temple. Jesus identifies with the woman and with all those down through history who have been set-up by a crowd of angry accusers, and who are made to carry the burden of the crowd's own sins and moral blindness. And here is the key part---it doesn't really matter if she is guilty or innocent of the charge leveled against her. And, it doesn't really matter if the "scapegoats" we find in our own small gatherings are guilty or not. It is that we have no right to assume a collective sense of moral superiority at the expense of another, when we group together with those we feel to be like ourselves in designating someone else as our inferior.

Jesus bends down and writes something in the sand. No one knows what He writes. Some suggest that He was simply scribbling in the sand, a way of expressing His disinterest in what He saw going on before Him. (If that scene were to take place

today, He might have taken out His I smart phone and started going through His emails.) But by bending down, He is no longer looking down at her; He is beside her, looking at her; He is on her side. Then, He stands up and says that single line with which everyone is familiar, even if they have not read a single page of the New Testament, "Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." What Jesus is doing is asking each of them to take responsibility for his own actions, and not to take refuge in the anonymity of the crowd. Whoever throws the first stone has to step away from the crowd and profess that he is sinless, which of course none of them is able to do.

Today's Gospel challenges us to reflect on whether we engage in any kind of 'scapegoating' behavior in our own lives; to see whether, when gathered with our friends or family members, we always seem to find that same one to talk about, to gossip about, to find fault with, to tear down; to see whether we ever resort to a kind of "group-think" that provides us with a sense of assumed superiority; to recognize what is the feeling of satisfaction that kind of behavior provides us with, what is the sense of belonging, of togetherness, of unity that is achieved. And, ultimately how fair is that, when we recognize that none of us is without sin, without fault, none of us is perfect?

Let us pray that we can "drop the stones" from our hands, that we can possess the attitude of Jesus whereby we do not feel the need to judge anyone simply to feel better about ourselves, and that we build bridges, not walls of accusation, between ourselves and others.