

**Fifth Sunday in Lent**  
**April 7, 2019**  
**Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass**  
**of**  
**St. Thomas More Catholic Parish**  
**celebrated at**  
**St. Joseph Catholic Church**  
**116 Theodore St.**  
**Scranton, PA 18508**  
**John 8:1-11**

The influence of Jesus Christ upon the culture in which we live is so strong, even among those who do not confess Him as Lord, that we take it as self-evident that the death penalty should not be applied to those who are guilty of the sin of adultery. But this is not self-evident to those who have not been raised in a Christian culture, or one whose roots are in the civilization that the Church founded. Just this week the Sultanate of Brunei amended the laws to impose death by stoning upon those found guilty of adultery. Two thousand years after Jesus spared the woman caught in the very act of adultery, the inclination to kill adulterers is alive and well.

Therefore, we should speak briefly as to why such a penalty would ever have been part of God's law, the law of which Jesus Christ is the author, since He is the Word of God, the eternal Son of the Father. Why does the Torah prescribe death as the penalty for adultery?

Adultery is destructive of the social order because it is contrary to commitments people make to each other and which enable a society to function. Adultery introduces a culture of suspicion into a community that relies upon the fulfillment of promises people make to each other. As such, it causes competition to develop amongst neighbors, whose common purpose ought to be the mutual defense of the state. Where trust is destroyed, unit cohesion in the armed forces becomes well-nigh impossible and could thus literally threaten the survival of a vulnerable people, such as the people of Israel in their exodus from Egypt. In a nation where adultery is still a crime according to the Uniform Code of Military Justice, the concept should not be difficult for Americans to understand. If we consider that a person's acts could potentially issue in the death of an entire nation, we can see why the penalty for such acts might be death for the offenders.

But adultery does not only threaten the survival of the nation. Adultery is the profanation of the sacred, contrary to the nature of people made in the image of God, made for fidelity, made to give life. Just as faithfulness issues in life and health, unfaithfulness issues in death and disease, causing us to see our neighbors as objects to be used and our spouses as expendable commodities. Priceless partners given to each other for the building up of God's Kingdom on earth become irreconcilable enemies whose caustic hatred taints everything they touch; and this sin is then the cause not only of the death of marriage but of the death of trust and the attendant death of community. The death penalty is thus seen as restorative, for the offenders have been purged from the society they had harmed; it is reparative, for they receive the penalty due for their misdeeds; and it is proscriptive, for it is a warning to others tempted to follow the same destructive path.

All this is to say that adultery is an egregious sin and an offense to the Lord who created and redeemed us and who desires us to live forever with Him in heaven. The fact that Jesus spared the woman caught in the act of adultery does not mean that her sin was not serious, or that it did not offend Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God. The sparing of the woman caught in the act of adultery means that even the most egregious sins can be forgiven and that those guilty of such sins can still be vessels of grace and agents for life. Despite their dealing in death, they still have the capacity to bring life to the world.

Jesus has power over sin and death. Thus, He is able to transform those committed to death to become married to life. He changed the orientation of those who had brought the woman to Him by telling them, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to cast a stone at her." In this way he demonstrated that all of us deserve death for the sins we have committed; and since we don't desire death for ourselves, our desire in this light for the death of sinners is significantly diminished. Just as we desire life for ourselves, we who fall short of the glory of God, so we desire life for our neighbors who have likewise fallen short.

Jesus also transformed the orientation of the woman, who passively and silently awaited the penalty due her. She did not protest what very well could have been her end. She did not confess her guilt, nor did she promise amendment of life. She didn't even point the finger at the man who was guilty with her. In her silence she condemned herself; and after all the sinners walked away, she was still standing there, waiting to be punished. But Jesus said to her, "Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again." He showed her that her sin did not define her, nor did it determine her ultimate fate. The Lord's forgiveness and mercy mean that she retained the capacity to live and to give life.

Jesus' forgiveness overcomes, even overrides, both the external and internal voices that tell us our sins make us incapable of further good. Our society has plenty of people who speak and act as though the sins of our past life should disqualify us from any position of responsibility and authority, who insist that no misdeeds ever be forgiven or forgotten. They are the modern-day puritans who would sew a scarlet letter on our chests so our guilt would be apparent to all and would thus inhibit our participation in a common life. And our society has plenty of people, also, who have so internalized their guilt, are so ashamed and despairing, that they imagine the sins of their past life do indeed disqualify them from being vessels of life. They stand on the sidelines and allow the self-righteous to push them down, because they believe that's all they deserve or even that that is all they can do. Jesus' forgiveness, his unwillingness to condemn even the soldiers who beat and crucified him, exposes those tendencies for the lies they are. Yes, sin is powerful and destructive, but Jesus rose from the dead, and thus He is more powerful; and He is desirous to share that power, that those who once dealt in death may become the constructive vessels of life He intended them to be from the foundation of the world. The lies we are told and the lies we tell ourselves don't stand a chance beside the love of God that can raise the dead to life and bring good from evil.

Jesus set aside the death penalty for adultery, but this didn't come out of nowhere. His mercy and forgiveness were prefigured in the life of King David, whose kingdom has not and shall not come to an end. David committed adultery, and the consequences were nearly the destruction of Israel. But David repented of his sin, and one of his direct descendants became the foster father of Jesus Christ, the Lord of Life and King of the Universe. St. Joseph, the Patron of the Universal Church and of this very building in which we worship, is the son of an adulteress, Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite. How fortunate we all are who benefit from St. Joseph's prayers and protection, that a thousand years before Jesus was born, He spared her, as well. May the eyes of all be opened to see the good that can come from even the worst of sinners.