

## Homily for the Fifth Sunday of Lent

### *Love and the law: What did Jesus do?*

(Scriptures for this Sunday's liturgy)

We don't know what Jesus wrote on the ground  
but we do know that back in Jesus' day,  
writing on the ground in this way was a sign of being distraught.

It's clear that Jesus resisted taking the political bait  
to argue with the scribes and the Pharisees  
and it's safe to assume that they were at least a little insulted  
that Jesus was ignoring their questions.

But in the face of this game of  
"My rules are better than your rules"  
-- Jesus chooses not to play.

That doesn't mean that Jesus thought rules were no good.

He recognizes that the woman in the story  
has broken an important rule:  
she has committed adultery.

But Jesus isn't in this just for the rules.  
He's in this for the person - who is bound by the rules.

These days,  
we can tend to get this business  
about Jesus and rules and persons mixed up.

The way some folks talk you might think  
that while Jesus cared very much about loving people  
- he didn't care at all about rules and laws.

Well, it's true that the whole of Jesus' message  
can be summed up in the word LOVE.  
But we can't lose sight of the fact that for Jesus,  
love was not some  
free-wheeling, personally-fulfilling, feel-good emotion:  
for Jesus, love was *law*.

That is to say:  
for Jesus, love is what binds us to God and to one another;  
for Jesus, love is what renders us accountable to God and to one another;  
for Jesus, love is what holds each of us responsible  
- not so much for our own happiness and comfort-  
but for the common good,

and especially for the welfare of the poor.

That's not to say that people exist for the sake of the law,  
- not even for the law of love.

Rather, the law, including the law of love,  
exists for those who are bound by it.

Why was Jesus distraught?

What distressed Jesus

in the questions of the scribes and the Pharisees  
is that they were concerned only about the law  
and cared not at all about the woman before them.

What Jesus sees so clearly is the person,  
he sees the *woman*:  
who has sinned, who has been found out, who is ashamed,  
who is accused and judged and who is waiting to be sentenced.

The scribes and Pharisees want only  
to know how to get rid of her.

Jesus' only interest is to save her -  
to save her from the rule-breaking foolishness of her sin.

Jesus wants to save her

- from her failure to respect how she was bound to God and her husband
- from her failure to be true to promises she had made,  
to the word she had given
- from her failure to be responsible for the good of others in her life.

And how does he do that?

First he dismisses those who care only about the rules.

Those who cared only about the law  
now become the shamed and the embarrassed.

Now *they* are the ones caught, exposed,  
judged and condemned,

first by Jesus' silence

and then by his exposing their own infractions of the law:

*"Let the one among you who is without sin cast the first stone..."*

Once the hypocrites are gone,

Jesus draws the woman into the court of his mercy.

He fully recognizes her sin - but chooses not to condemn her.

He frees her from her sin, sending her off -- with but one caution:

"Do not sin any more."

That is,

"Stop breaking the rules!"

Because when you break the rules  
you break the law that love is.”

Jesus is all about love  
but that doesn't mean he doesn't expect us  
to play by the rules of love,  
to live by the law that love is.

The love Jesus enjoins on us makes great demands  
and often those demands are made  
at the expense of our personal comfort and individual freedom.

The greatest image of the law of love is the Cross.  
This is the kind of self-giving LOVE  
with which Jesus expects us to love one another.  
Not some free-wheeling, personally-fulfilling, feel-good emotion  
but rather, a love whose rule makes life and death demands on us  
and calls us to accountability to God, to one another,  
and to our own word.

This is love that holds us responsible first for the good of others,  
and especially for the poor.

That's the love we find on the Cross  
and that same love is shared with us in the Eucharist  
at the Lord's table, on the altar of his sacrifice,  
and in the supper of his mercy.

May the love we receive in this sacrament  
be the love we offer each other  
and may we, like the woman in the gospel, come to know  
how merciful is the Lord whose love is law.

- *Rev. Austin H. Fleming*