

"The One Without Sin..."

5th Sunday of Lent – Year C

Isaiah 43:16-21
Psalms 126:1-2, 2-3, 4-5, 6

Philippians 3:8-14
John 8:1-11

One of the characters in the classic film "Gone With the Wind" is a woman of ill repute named Belle Watling. Madam of the Atlanta brothel, she is shunned by polite society, especially by the respectable southern women of the city. Upon presenting herself as a "nurse" to the Confederate hospital in Atlanta, she is turned away flat. When she offers her money to support the hospital, no one is interested in receiving money made from her business, until she approached Melanie Wilkes. Despite the bickering of the other women towards Belle, Melanie treated Belle with kindness, accepting her donation for the hospital with sincere gratitude for her generosity. Even Belle, herself, is a bit uncomfortable with Melanie's acknowledgment of her kindness, saying, "I'm a Confederate, same as everybody else."

Years later, after the end of the Civil War, Belle takes advantage of an opportunity to repay Melanie for her kindness, for which Melanie, again, wishes to express her gratitude. When Belle hears that Melanie plans to call on her at her "house" to personally express her thanks, Belle, visits Melanie under cover of night, hoping to prevent Melanie's visit the next

day, and so do damage to Melanie's reputation by openly associating with her. In the clandestine exchange in Belle's carriage, parked in the street before Melanie's home, one can see both the gratitude and mutual respect the two women have for each other; one an honorable southern woman, the other a woman of ill repute. It is a respect and gratitude sparked not by any approval of Belle's business and lifestyle, not by Melanie's elitist status as an honorable southern woman, but by Melanie's initial kindness, despite Belle's social status; a kindness returned by Belle toward the only person who ever treated her with respect.

I am reminded of this minor of minor side-stories in the four-hour epic "Gone With the Wind" whenever I hear or read the story of Jesus and the Woman Caught in Adultery. Ironically, if such an event were to occur today, in the midst of our current social ambiance, we might read such headlines as "Jesus Condone Adultery!" or "Christ's Double Standard!" or even "Marital Standards Shattered as Jesus Protects Adulteress!"

However, the key to Christ's actions lies not in what He does, but in what He does not do. He does not listen to the



The Woman Caught in Adultery

accusations made against the woman by the socio-religious elite, nor does He even pay them any mind, but simply doodles in the dirt as they carry on. He does not address their concerns with any profound proclamation of the kingdom or declaration of a point of law, but "blows them off" with a terse statement before returning to his doodling. He does not condemn the woman, nor does He approve of her lifestyle and sin, either before the gathered accusers, or after they have dispersed, but plainly declares privately to her, "*nor do I condemn you. Go and sin no more.*" Christ's actions toward the woman constitute nothing more nor less than a simple act of kindness in the face of others who would seek to judge and, more ignobly condemn her, despite their own questionable morality.

The Gospel of John never identifies this woman, nor do we know based on the Gospel what became of her. Our tradition, however, associates her with Mary Magdalene; the same woman whom our tradition associates with the Penitent Woman of Luke's Gospel who wept at Jesus' feet, drying them with her hair (Lk 7:36-50), the same woman from whom, Mark tells us, Jesus expelled seven demons (Mk 16:9), the same woman who in John's Gospel is one of Jesus most faithful, ardent friends and disciples, the same woman who in all four Gospels is among the women who approach Jesus Tomb to find it empty, and in three of four Gospels, the first person to whom Jesus appeared after the Resurrection.

Combining all these accounts, and their association by our tradition as a community of faith, we see the fruits of Jesus simple act of kindness toward a woman of ill repute, a woman caught in adultery. He did not condemn, nor did He condone in a crass effort to win her over by being "understanding" and "accepting." He did not join in the sentiment of the crowd,

nor did He take the exact opposite position, but maintained the fact that she had, in fact, sinned. He did not participate in the extreme measure of stoning her, nor did He take the opposite extreme and excuse her. Rather, His simple act of kindness toward her -- treating her not as a adulterous woman, not as a mere subject of a point of law, not as an object to be used by men as a means of gratification and pleasure, but as a woman, a human being with dignity before God and a recipient of His love, His compassion and His corrective mercy -- bore fruit as she, according to our tradition, became one of Christ's most grateful and devoted followers, one of his closest friends and one of few who, in the Gospels of Matthew (27:56), Mark (15:40) and John (19:25), never abandoned Him, even when He faced crucifixion.

We too are called to imitate Christ in simple acts of kindness, even, perhaps especially toward those who might otherwise be considered, rightly or wrongly, sinners, outcasts or people of ill repute. If we consider our Gospel accounts along with our Church's tradition regarding Mary Magdalene, we see how far a simple act of kindness carried a woman otherwise condemned to stoning, or a continued life of adulterous behavior. Who knows how far our own simple acts of kindness can go? Neither condemning nor condoning, neither prejudiced nor permissive, but aimed at reflecting the corrective call to overcome our sinfulness, we like Christ, can carry others to a stronger life of grace and virtue, of living the life Christ calls us to live, to overcome the sinfulness that weighs us all down; a call given continuously by the One without sin, who invites us to turn away from sin, and be faithful to the Gospel.

Rev. William Nicholas
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