
Double Your Lenten Joy: Acknowledge Forgiveness, Anticipate Resurrection

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith
Lent 5 – Year C

In the name of God: “Our Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend.” Amen. —*The Hymnal*, 388, v.5

Wow – Have I got news for us! On this Sunday, the fifth Sunday in Lent, we get the benefit of not one but two gospel messages. I repeat, there are two gospel messages available to us today. So we get an unexpected bonus or bounce on our Lenten journey toward Easter Sunday with its resurrection promises. That’s right: you may have lost an hour of sleep last night with daylight savings time; but you have also gained a gospel opportunity that you were most likely unaware of. So it’s my preacher’s pleasure to apprise you of a great boon that you would otherwise have missed today. Here goes!

We here in the Episcopal Church have one particular gospel reading, which you heard me read just a few minutes ago. But our brothers and sisters in the Roman Catholic church have a different gospel reading and yet—and yet their gospel reading is so intricately related to ours that when you hear the two of them side-by-side you will readily acknowledge that they belong together. And accordingly you will see for yourself that you have the option to embrace both of them as your own personal, spiritual message from God appointed for you today—by faith, that is; yes, everything worthy that we do here in worship is by faith.

Here’s the Catholic churches gospel reading appointed for today. It’s the story about Jesus pardoning the woman caught in adultery. “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” That’s what Jesus says to the adulterous woman after he has shamed all of her accusers with that unforgettable sentence, “Let the one among you without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” “One by one,” of course, “they went away ... beginning with the elders.” And then Jesus grants the woman absolution by declaring to her, “Neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now on do not sin anymore” (John 8:9-11).

Now that’s a perfect text for this fifth week of Lent! It’s the divine pardon that we’re all longing to hear especially if we’ve been struggling with our Lenten disciplines or feel otherwise challenged about our righteousness before God. “Neither do I condemn you,” are the gracious words we yearn for and have come to rely upon in our loving Lord, even if (or especially because) they are followed by his holy commandment to “Go, and from now on do not sin anymore” (John 8:11).

But there’s a different Lenten opportunity provided in our Episcopal church with its gospel reading for this fifth week. As we transition to Palm Sunday and Holy Week ahead we have the story of Jesus encountering another woman. That’s the first similarity between these two Lenten options. But then we find these interesting differences. Rather than a woman caught in sin we find a righteous woman, Mary, the sister of Jesus’ friend Lazarus whom he had raised from the dead. And in her gratitude and devotion to Jesus, for his love in general and for his resurrecting her brother in particular, we hear the following:

Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus’ feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.
But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said,

"Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?"

Jesus said,

"Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me" (John 12:3-5, 7-8).

'Leave her alone!' Jesus exclaimed to Judas. But in effect that exclamation is also what Jesus says in the gospel story of the woman caught in adultery. 'Leave her alone' too, we see him declare implicitly. And here we have the second similarity between the two gospel stories appointed in our two different church communities for this fifth week of Lent. The stories are both about Jesus' encounters with women who were being confronted by domineering men and his exclaiming in their defense: 'Leave her alone!'

Now with that kind of consistency in his behavior toward women we can appreciate why Jesus is embraced at both extremes of the political spectrum: by both feminists at one end and traditionalists at the other. Indeed we might say that without having to be moderate Jesus practiced an extreme love ethic that still today wins him a loyal following among diverse people. Feminists appreciate that he rescued women from the domination of men and traditionalists appreciate that he confronted the adulteress with the commandment to 'Go and sin no more.'

But here let me offer a little lighthearted interlude before we conclude. It's that joke that you've likely heard about the woman caught in adultery. Now I admit that the joke works best with an audience that is familiar with the Catholic dogma of the Immaculate Conception. But the rest of us can get at least a chuckle out of it too. See what you think. The gospel story is told the same way up to the point when Jesus says to the accusers of the adulterous woman, "Let the one among you without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." At that moment a stone comes out of crowd and whizzes by Jesus on its way to strike the woman despite his intervention. Turning around quickly—and we could hope that he was heroically able to intercept the stone—Jesus says to the stone thrower, "Mother, please! I'm trying to make a point here."

Oh well, I said to fully appreciate the joke you need to be familiar with Catholic theology of Mary's immaculate conception—that she along with Jesus are the only two human beings to be born without original sin. And I notice that most of us did get a laugh or two out of hearing it. Of course if you were Roman Catholic you might properly object that throwing stones is entirely out of character for the Blessed Virgin Mary. Of course the joke is way off the mark; the real Mother Mary would not side with the woman's accusers. Rather she would join Jesus in deflecting their self-righteousness, pardoning the woman's transgressions, and finally exhorting her to "Go, and from now on do not sin anymore" (John 8:11). Well, it's only a joke of course! And so much for theological joking around.

But now, how about these two gospel stories as our own, spiritually true stories? How are they true to us and not just about vague religious teachings or general moral principles? Well, a double blessing can happen for us if we follow the apostle Paul's instruction in the reading from Philippians also appointed for today. There St. Paul invokes the metaphor of keeping his 'eyes on the prize' in order to complete his faith journey. And with that metaphor he evokes our need also, to keep our 'eyes on the prize' in order to complete our faith journey in these final days of Lent and indeed in the years ahead. As Paul says:

Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own [that is, the goal of resurrection from the dead]; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 3:[12], 13-14).

Now, by evoking that great metaphor of keeping our eyes on the prize the apostle combines both of our gospel stories highlighted today. On the one hand he puts behind him his past sins and even his achievements as a celebrity rabbi: "forgetting what lies behind," consigns all of that to the past and instead of dwelling on it he 'strains forward to what lies ahead.' And what is it that lies ahead? It is that ultimate prize of resurrection from the dead that Mary celebrated by anointing Jesus' feet. Of course she was acknowledging his resurrecting her brother but Jesus himself interpreted her action as an anticipation of his own approaching Passion and its resurrection outcome. It is in that connection that St. Paul, writing about his own passion as an apostle but also on our behalf, declares that

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead (Philippians 3:10-11).

Christian friends, surely that is available also to us, just for the asking, as our own Lenten joy and ecstasy too? Isn't it also accessible to us to embrace the apostolic joy of putting behind us past sins and even our achievements—'regarding everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus ... suffering the loss of all things, and regarding them as rubbish, in order that we may gain Christ?' Surely we too can affirm with the woman caught in adultery that Jesus does not condemn us either! That's right, even when he says to us as he said to her, "Go and sin no more," it is said not with scorn or condemnation but in expectation of better things to come.

That's right, in this way it all comes back to us and our journey of faith toward our own passion and resurrection experiences in life. And it's in that connection that we have those two different gospel stories with two different occasions for Lenten joy available to us. With that doubling of joy, celebrating the forgiveness of sins and anticipating resurrection life both here and hereafter, we can pray again our Collect appointed for today:

Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners: Grant your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise; that, among the swift and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. *Amen.* (www.lectionarypage.net/YearC_RCL/Lent/CLent5_RCL.html)

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*