

For those of you who were possibly expecting an adulterous woman to speak today – I hate to disappoint you. . . But we do, however, have a guest speaker.

My name is Nicodemus – who you get to know only in St. John’s Gospel – where I am identified as a secret follower of Jesus – because of fear of the Jews.

That’s because I am one of them – a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin. Whenever I have mentioned Jesus to them – they say no prophet can come from Galilee – and so I have followed Jesus at a distance – trying to learn more about him.

Well today I experienced something that makes me want to love him more – and fear them less. Let me tell you about it. . .

It was early morning, and the temple area was only beginning to stir. There were not many people around, nowhere near the crowds that will gather later in the day.

In this muted atmosphere, in the great open courtyard of the temple complex – Jesus is approached by a group of people. They are my colleagues of the Sanhedrin – the Jewish court – the scribes and Pharisees – the educated people of our day.

They have worked hard to get where they are at, and they take their responsibilities seriously.

One of these responsibilities is maintaining stability in a society that is more than a little prone to instability. Not an easy thing for them to achieve as there has been frequent rebellions against the Romans – who take a savage stance if there is any trouble: the Roman practice is to first kill anyone who even looks suspicious – and ask questions later. So our Jewish leaders are just trying to maintain the status quo as the Romans breath down their necks.

These leaders---- see Jesus as a threat to their desired stability – for he is constantly challenging the traditional authorities and seems to have a group of followers who accompany him everywhere. Jesus disregards the normal Jewish ritual laws about eating by sitting down to meals with known law-breakers – and has even been seen touching lepers!

Now with Passover now approaching and crowds flocking to Jerusalem – they really want to keep him in check – for any hint of an uprising at this time will bring down the wrath of the Romans on a lot of innocent heads.

So one way they think of to control him is to discredit him as a teacher. If he is given a dilemma and fails to find a solution – his position of moral authority will be undermined, and people will be less likely to flock around him as they are now doing. This will diminish the danger he poses to himself, to them, and to the whole city.

So they finally hit on a problem they themselves are wrestling with – what to do when the Law of Moses, that is our religious laws – and the edicts of the Roman empire – conflict with each other. Such a situation arises whenever Jews are commanded by the Law of Moses to impose the death penalty for a particular offense – such as adultery. .

You see the Romans have restricted that decision to themselves – only the appointed Governor can impose the death sentence – no other person may do so.

So what is the right thing to do – wondered the scribes and Pharisees?? Follow the Law of Moses and risk the consequences. Or simply do what the Romans command?

One of them hits on the idea of posing this question to Jesus. They have been arguing about this one woman recently caught in the very act of adultery – so they want to hear what he has to say.

So this morning, they took the woman from her prison cell to the Temple precincts where Jesus is teaching. . . much has been made of the fact that they take the woman – but not the man – suggesting the man hasn't been charged.

But that simply is not correct. By Jewish Law – both parties to adultery were charged and punished. There was no leniency shown to the man, and in fact Rabbinic law held that he was more responsible for what happened than the woman.

As for why they only brought her – perhaps it was to see if Jesus would speak to her – which would give them one more thing to complain about!

So the trap is set. What would Jesus say? What would Jesus do?

Well at first, he did nothing – but write in the dirt! Perhaps he was trying to unnerve his adversaries – or he was possibly giving himself time to think of a response – or he simply wanted to calm his anger at their lust for vengeance.

But the questioners are not put off. They keep demanding an answer, until Jesus straightens up and faces them. Then he says the direct, devastating words – “Let the one without sin cast the first stone!”

Masterful! He does not condone what the woman has done, nor does he dismiss her sin as unimportant or acceptable.

Jesus turns the table – he makes this about them – and not about her. . . YES, stone her – but only if you yourself are not guilty of any sin!

As they drift away, beginning with the eldest – the one according to tradition would be allowed to cast the first stone – Jesus is left with the woman – scandalous! And he does talk with her – because there can be no reconciliation without conversation – and he tells her: “Go your way, and do not sin anymore.”

So Jesus condemns the sin, but not the sinner. And with his merciful words – she is called to change – to turn her life around – to get on the road that leads her to God – rather than away from God.

And so again, the tables are turned – and this becomes less about her – and more about US --- because we all need to hear Jesus' merciful message: including all of you here today.

Merciful – God will give us a 2nd chance, and a 3rd, and a 4th --- God will NEVER give up on us – for God is slow to anger, and rich in mercy.

God does, however, require one thing: that we be as merciful to others as God has been to us! So as our time together comes to a close – remember the words of St. Paul last week: we are ambassadors of Christ – that is: Christ's representatives here on earth – and to us has been given the **MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION!**

So the challenge this week is to quit giving people the silent treatment – and have some conversations this week: Because there can be no reconciliation without conversation.