

My Brothers and Sisters,

Most of us believe that actions speak louder than words. Throughout Scripture, God communicated with us both in word and deed. In last Sunday's Gospel, Jesus spoke to us about God's love and forgiveness through the parable of the Prodigal Son or, better, the parable of the Prodigal Father. In today's Gospel, Jesus demonstrated God's love and forgiveness in action.

To understand the context of the Gospel, we need to understand that the scribes and Pharisees who brought the woman to Jesus could not have cared less that she had committed adultery. They were using her, exploiting her, to trap Jesus. If he told them to let her go, they could say he could not possibly be from God since he did not observe the law of Moses, which was the law of God. On the other hand, if he approved of them stoning her, his message of love and forgiveness would have been rendered meaningless, and he would have lost all credibility.

First, Jesus challenged those who had condemned her: "*Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her. '...When the scribes and Pharisees heard what Jesus had said, they went away one by one, beginning with the elders....'*"

In effect, Jesus reminded them that they were one with her, united with her, in needing God's forgiveness. Jesus certainly was not saying that they had all committed adultery. What he was saying was that they had all sinned. In fact, they had sinned by using the woman to trap him. If they all had sinned, they needed God's mercy and forgiveness as much as she did. Since they were sinful as she was, they were in no position to judge or condemn her.

Jesus' challenge to the scribes and Pharisees is equally a challenge to us. Most of us, at times, judge and condemn others. Although we may not be guilty of the same sins as they are, we are still guilty of sin and, therefore, need God's mercy and forgiveness as much as they do. Since we are sinful just as they are, we are in no position to judge or condemn others.

We might object that our sins are not as serious as someone else's. Still, we must not judge because God alone knows the secrets of our hearts. Although our specific sins may not be as serious as we think someone's else's are, their hearts may be more pure, more loving, than ours.

Second, after everyone had left, Jesus asked the woman if anyone had condemned her. When she replied no one, he said, "*Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and sin no more.*"

In our imagination, I think most of us picture God's forgiveness as washing the slate clean, doing away with our past. Today's Gospel suggests another interpretation. At least some suggest that when Jesus told the woman to sin no more, he was not giving her an order or command. Rather, he was empowering her to change her life.

In other words, God's forgiveness and mercy are not primarily about our past but our future. They are not so much about God wiping away the sins of our past as God empowering us for our future. God's love, God's forgiveness, empowers us to change our lives for the better.

My brothers and sisters, today's second reading from Paul's Letter to the Philippians captures these two points of the Gospel. In effect, Paul wrote that justice or righteousness is always gift, never merited, and it is in sharing in the mystery and power of Jesus dying and rising that we are empowered to live better lives. Likewise, it is in sharing in the mystery and power of Jesus' dying and rising that we mature as human persons and as Christians or, to use Matthew Kelly's words, grow into the-best-version-of-ourselves. In this year's *Best Lent Ever*, Matthew Kelly reminds us that the biggest lie of all is that "holiness is not possible for me."