

Monsignor Dennis Sheehan
Homily Given on March 25, 2007
5th Sunday of Lent – Liturgical Year C

Home, it's said, is where they have to take you in. Being "homeless" is more than lacking a roof over your head. Being home-less is to be without loved ones, without those who care or are concerned. Being away from home can sometimes be an aching, longing experience. I remember being away from the Boston area for several years in a complex and challenging assignment. The first night back, I went to dinner with several old friends. In the course of the evening, a deep sense of satisfaction and contentment caught me up. I was home, and tears welled up from nowhere!

Strange as it may seem, I submit that today's Lenten Gospel is a story of "coming home". The woman taken in act of adultery is clearly guilty. Even Jesus does not question that. As a consequence, she finds herself the object of righteous indignation, of scorn and thirst for punishment. She's not only profoundly shamefaced and humiliated, she's facing almost certain death. She's as far from home as human experience in this world will take her. She is totally exposed, isolated, and alone.

She's also a pawn in a power play. As far as we know, in Jesus' time, the biblical penalty of stoning for adultery was merely a memory. In addition, the Roman governor had a long ago deprived the Jewish authority of the right to execute offenders. So what's the point of asking Jesus what he thinks? These connivers want to hoist this Jesus on a petard. If he goes for stoning, he'll lose the common people. In addition, he'll be inciting violence forbidden by Rome. If he stands against the stoning, he's branded as anti-law, as a non-observer, a religious loose cannon.

Is it so different now? It's too easy to say, "How primitive!" and dismiss the whole scene as far distant from ourselves. The accusers in the Gospel are operating on a deep-seated conviction. To them, adultery tore at the very fabric of their society. It damaged the most sacred of bonds, that between a husband and wife. So, they conclude, the damage has to be undone. That's best accomplished by getting rid of the offender. With that mindset, they confront Jesus.

It's not so different today. Get rid of the undocumented foreigner. Get rid of the sinner. Chuck them out of the country. Throw them out of the church. It's our home, after all, and they're breaking it up. If we just get rid of them, we'll be home again.

Of course it doesn't work. We know it. Jesus knows it. Soon enough, we'll find the other scapegoats, other people to blame, other people to throw out.

Jesus isn't caught up in the Scribes' and Pharisees' enthusiasm to exclude. He moves to what? I say he moves to bring the woman home. They have her accused and themselves righteous. Jesus quietly challenges that assumption. Let the one who is without sin throw the first stone. And he waits....and waits....and waits. Finally the woman is alone with Jesus. It's true enough to say she's back home.

Jesus doesn't minimize the sin. The woman has indeed undermined the bonds of marriage, and this sin needs healing. But how different is Jesus' remedy. He acts against sin not by heaping on condemnation; he reaches out, draws in, and welcomes the sinner home again.

I came across this same theme from a book, of all things, about excellence in American business practice. The authors were looking for practices that distinguished successful businesses. Among other things, they found that companies that don't tolerate failure don't do very well. Good firms encourage risk, venture, new initiatives. Many fail. But the few that succeed make all the difference. Jesus today is not urging you to fail. He's giving the failed woman another chance. That's God's way, even when it's not ours.

Have we offended, failed, gone far from home? It might not be adultery. But it might be malice, lies, an uncaring attitude. Jesus is not looking to throw us out. He's at work now gathering us in, bringing us home. Welcome, he says, to the home of forgiven sinners.

That's the home where Jesus lives. Blessed Lent to us all.