

**Lent 5**  
**4.6.25**

For about 20 years, I conducted formation sessions for Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion or EMs. Those sessions were held on various Saturdays in our diocese throughout the year. New and continuing ministers would participate in these sessions – to learn how to be a Eucharistic Minister for the first time or to re-educate themselves about that ministry.

At the end of the session, the participants would be invited to ask questions they might have. Almost always someone would ask, “Father, when I’m giving out Holy Communion, I know that one of the people who comes up in my line has not been married in the Church. Shouldn’t I deny them Holy Communion?” There are other forms of the same question – the person receiving Holy Communion is “living with someone,” is this or that, which is contrary to Church law. I’ve always responded to this question in the same way, “whoever approaches you in your line, you offer them Holy Communion.” Full stop. The person who asks that question is never satisfied with my answer. They want to “drop the hammer on the person attempting to receive Holy Communion” because they know or think they know the person’s moral standing with the Church and God. They seem disappointed with my response. Instead, it seems they want me to be harsher on the sinner; and THEY want to be harsher on the sinner.

But the fact of the matter is we don’t ask anyone their moral status when they come to receive Holy Communion. Rather, we assume that as they present themselves for Holy Communion they are presenting themselves to the Lord in good faith. We don’t allow some to come to receive the Eucharist and prevent others from doing so because of the situation we perceive them to be in. The fact of the matter is that none of us is worthy to receive Holy Communion. And we say as much right before we come forward to receive the Eucharist. Recall those words, “Lord, I am not worthy to receive you. But only say the word and my soul will be healed.”

There is something in our human nature that wants to point out the sins of others. Perhaps it takes the pressure off of us and the sins we have committed. Perhaps looking at others’ perceived immorality or sinfulness gives us a smug confidence that we are better or a level above others.

That is the lesson in today’s gospel passage. The Scribes and Pharisees were trying to trap Jesus. If Jesus says, “show the woman mercy,” then they can argue he is disregarding the Law of Moses. If he condemns her to death according to Mosaic Law, then he is in trouble with the Romans who are the only legitimate authority to oversee the use of the death penalty.

Instead, Jesus focusses on a greater law. Loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and being. And loving our neighbor as ourselves. In addressing this situation as he did, Jesus affirms that every human being is worthy and worthwhile in the eyes of God.

In these days, it seems we are quick to inflict legal consequences on certain groups and ethnicities. We even do so without any due process. A common argument for doing so is, “well, they broke the law. And they should suffer the consequences.”

With that I would ask:

- Have you ever exceeded the speed limit?
- Has your car insurance company dropped you without your knowledge? If you continue driving without insurance then you are technically driving on a suspended license.
- Have you paid your taxes – paid taxes on ALL your earnings?
- Have you mistakenly walked out of the store without paying for something, like a case of water on the bottom of your shopping cart?
- Have you padded the books on what you charge for your work?
- Have you “stretched the truth” when giving testimony about a car accident you were in – maybe fudging the details a bit to make yourself look better?
- Have you taken off or not been accurate with the hours you say you’re working?

I could go on. The fact of the matter is, if you've done any of these things, you have broken the law or have been unethical, at least. What one of us when pulled over for speeding doesn't wish for or ask the officer to give a warning? What one of us when audited by the IRS doesn't hope for or request leniency for our failure to pay taxes on ALL our earnings? As we wish or hope for ourselves, Jesus tells us to treat others in the same way.

Jesus has come to heal us. The purpose of Lent is to help us turn away from sin and be faithful to the gospel. (Those are the words we heard when ashes were placed on our foreheads on Ash Wednesday.) He forgave the woman in today's story. And he told her not to sin again.

Did she sin again? More than likely, because she like us is human. Do we sin after we make our confession? Of course, because we are human. But God never tires of us coming back to him in sincerity and with a contrite heart. When we do that, he forgives us completely and he even forgets our sins.

Let's stop playing the game of "gotcha" with others. Rather, may we make it our mission in these remaining days of Lent to focus on ourselves - our need for repentance, our confession, and how we should live moving forward – instead of constantly judging others for what they do or fail to do.

In this penitential season, what one of us going to the Sacrament of Penance or Reconciliation wants the priest to chastise us, deny us absolution, hold us up to a large group as an example of what not to do or how not to behave? None of us wants that. We expect to experience God's mercy, compassion, and complete forgiveness when approaching the priest and when asking God for his mercy. If that is what we expect, then that's what we must share with others.

Does this mean we can never correct? That we can never redirect another? Of course, not. Parents do this. Spouses do this. Teachers do this. Priests do this. Citizens do this. But the most successful and life-changing experiences are ones that are done with compassion and mercy. The Communion line isn't the place to do this.

Again, the message of this story and the theme of the Lenten season is that we are worthy and that we are forgiven when we approach God with a humble and contrite heart – because that's what God wants for us. As God forgives – not just once, but over and over and over again, so we are to do to one another!

Amen? Amen!