

A young priest, after a year in his first assignment, told his Bishop just how nervous he became when had to preach. The Bishop said that he had learned over the years that a joke at the start of the sermon helped relax both him and the assembly. For example, he said he had once gotten everyone's attention by saying, "Last evening I was in the warm embrace of the woman I love." After a pause to let the suspense build, he added, to everyone's relief and laughter, "I was with my mother."

The young priest decided to try this same joke the following Sunday. He stood in the pulpit and announced "I spent last night in the arms of a hot woman." A shocked silence ensued and his mind went blank. "And for the life of me, I can't recall her name," and then added, "But the Bishop recommended her!"

A funny thing happened on the way to this gospel. It almost didn't make it. The story of the woman caught in adultery is not found in the most ancient manuscripts of John's gospel. But the community obviously knew and treasured this story, and because of the church's constant need to forgive one another, it eventually found its way into the text. Scholars believe that editors had REMOVED the story from the text because they believed it showed Jesus being too soft on sin. I'm glad that the Holy Spirit prevailed – and we have this rich text to ponder.

And as always in John's gospel, this story is many, many layered. Note the language we start with: "caught-brought-made to stand there" – these are verbs of power, control and dominance. In 2 short sentences the scribes and Pharisees are characterized clearly. What they are about is finding people in sin – and holding them there. In particular, the picture of the woman "made to stand before all of them" conveys this holding action. They are staring at her. The stare is the special tool of the self-righteous. The stare fixates the person, turns them into an object, tries to hold them in the mistake they have been caught in. The unflinching eyes of the stare attempts to stay the flow of time and the newness it always brings.

The scribes and Pharisees are predictable. They have caught the woman, and they are holding her in her sin. But they have no sin to hold Jesus in. So they devise a trap to catch Jesus in sin. Then they will hold Him in the sin they have trapped Him into. The scribes and Pharisees hold people in sin for a living. They are single-minded in this pursuit. Jesus is their target.

But their deceitful question "Moses commanded us to stone such women. What do you say?" – has unwittingly given Jesus the raw material of His response. In the imagination of Jesus, the mystic-prophet Moses/stones/adultery stirs up the founding events of Israel. Jesus is about to reenact them – with His own peculiar spin. Jesus writes on the ground with His finger – twice.

Almost everyone at one time or another has given in to curiosity and asked, "What did He write?" However, it is not important what He wrote. What is important is He wrote with His finger, he wrote on the earth, and He wrote twice. It is also important He bent down, straightened up, and bend down again. These actions bring us back to the Law of Moses and provide the answer to the question of the scribes and Pharisees, "Now what do you say?"

In the Book of Exodus, God writes the Ten Commandments and gives the 2 stone tablets to Moses. We are assured of divine authorship because we are told they were written with "the finger of God" (Exodus 31:18). Human authors use quills and parchment. God uses His finger that is capable of carving into the hardness of rock. Jesus also writes with His finger; He writes for God.

We need to remember the story. When Moses descended from His mountain encounter with God, He carried the stone tablets to the people. But as He drew close, He heard noise coming from the camp. It was the people dancing around the golden calf. He threw down the tablets and broke them. Then with the help of the sons of Levi he slaughtered 3000 of the revelers. The price of breaking the covenant was death. "In the law, Moses told us to stone such women."

As the Hebrew tradition evolved, this first breaking of the covenant and every subsequent breach was envisioned as adultery. Yahweh and His people were married, but Israel whored after strange gods. Yahweh even asked the prophet Hosea to symbolize this infidelity by marrying a woman who had a lover and was an adultress (Hosea 3:1). Given the overall evaluation of the Pharisees in the Gospel of John, this woman caught in adultery is an image of Israel who had strayed from the true God. In particular, it was the religious elite of Israel who had broken the covenant because they do not know the true teachings of Moses, teachings that Jesus is about to show them.

We know that the story in Exodus did not end with the death of the idolaters/adulterers. Moses returned to the mountain, pleaded for the people, and asked for something which may seem rather strange to us -- to see God's glory. God agreed to show Moses His glory -- but only showed Moses His back -- for "my face shall not be seen" (Exodus 32:22-23). The glory of God is too great to take face to face. When the glory of God passes by Moses, it has something wonderful to say: "The Lord, The Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin...." (Exodus 34:6-7). The divine glory -- too great to look on directly, is steadfast love and endless forgiveness.

So this is what Jesus has to say: It is an incomplete understanding of the Mosaic Law to stone people who have broken covenantal laws. The God who wrote the Law is not punishing and vindictive. The true interpretation of the Mosaic Law is that God always writes twice. And between the first and second writing is the reason why 2 writings are always needed. There are no sinless ones. Israel herself is only alive because God has forgiven her many adulteries. No one can cast the first stone for everyone lives by the grace of the forgiving God. Holding people in their sins while holding ourselves innocent is delusional. The question is not the condemnation of adultery but the continuing blindness of people to the universal necessity of forgiveness.

So Jesus writes with His finger -- the sign of God's authorship. He writes twice -- the sign of God's forgiveness. He writes on the earth -- the sign of our universal sinful condition. He refuses to stare at them -- the sign that sins are not held. (adapted from John Shea, *THE RELENTLESS WIDOW*, p. 89-93)

OK, I know that was a bit much -- but here's the point. Just one! Olympia Dukakis' character in the movie *STEEL MAGNOLIAS* says at one point "If you don't have anything nice to say, come sit by me!" Holding people in their mistakes is a popular pastime. It's difficult for us to resist it. Even fewer understand the 'handcuffing of people' that is really going on.

Holding people in sin is an all-too-common human procedure. In fact, it is so common it is taken for granted. We mindlessly engage in it. It is both pervasive and unconscious. We just assume the obituary of a lawyer who died at 82 will prominently feature the scandal he was involved in when he was 35. We unreflectively remark that she is doing quite well for an ex-addict, thereby using addiction as the permanent reference point for her life. Jail sentences are never over. We look at the 50-year-old and see the 22-year-old behind bars. Sin sticks. Ask anyone who has been caught, brought, and made to stand there.

This sheds light on that strange phrasing in John's gospel that the Risen Christ uses when He breathes on His disciples when He appears to them on Easter Sunday night: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (Jn 20:22-23). This is the condition that characterizes our communal life. We can hold each other in our mistakes or let each other go. We can be a prison to one another or the source of release. Both are possibilities. But it seems we easily gravitate toward 'holding in sin' and have to work at letting go.

As we grow up – and older – we will collect a lot of information about other people. Do we hold on to it? Or let it go? Hold them in sin – or release them? It's easy to see someone in the lens of their mistake. The person is always the guy with the DUI or the teenager who had an abortion or the cheat who did 18 months for tax evasion, the person who did us wrong so long ago, etc. We find it difficult to let go of sin, and tend to hold others in it.

People whose mistakes are well known and are 'held in sin' by large numbers of people often leave for other communities or even countries. People cannot or will not let go of their sin so they seek the company of people who do not know their sin. These new people are not more virtuous than the people they are fleeing. It is only that they do not know the sin. We hide our sins because we know that if they are not hidden, they will be held. Skeletons are kept in the closet because we know other people will hang them out on the porch. Then the only access to our house will be through the dead bones of our mistakes.

The opposite of 'holding in sin' is 'forgiving for life.' This is not the usual understanding of forgiveness that focuses on past transgression and its consequences. This understanding sees every human being poised on the edge of a future, a future that promises to be more aligned with the deepest truth about them. Often they are moving out of an alienated past that leaves residues both in them and in others. These 'leavings' will have to be dealt with.

However, the focus is on the next free step into the future. We are called to help them toward this new future, to 'forgive' them. In St. Augustine's commentary on this passage, he wrote "Et relictis sunt due: miseria et misericordia." "And 2 were left: misery and mercy." We are to be mercy to those in misery. Those who forgive. The 'for' before the verb 'give' is an intensive. It signifies a complete and total giving into the future that is emerging. The person is not identified with the past but with the free future they are struggling toward. In this vision the most profound word of forgiveness is the word Jesus speaks to the woman – and to all of us this day: "GO!" BEGIN AGAIN! GO! (Shea, THE RELENTLESS WIDOW, p. 95-97)