

Comedian Jonathan Winters tells of negotiations involving his autobiography. Several publishers he approached about his book wanted to be sure he included details of any scandalous relationships. Winters had decided not to tell all. 5 different publishers asked him, 'What about your affairs?' Winters answered, 'They are in order.'

Which reminds me of today's gospel – and a funny thing happened to this story on the way into the gospel. It almost didn't make it. It was hushed up, suppressed. It is missing from the early Greek manuscripts in the East. In the West it was missing from some early manuscripts, but was included in others.

So what was going on? Why would people in the church want to suppress this story? Because it makes Jesus look too soft on sin. The more severe the church became in its discipline – and this happened very early – the more difficult it became to tell a story like this about Jesus. And so it was hushed up. But the Holy Spirit won in the end and how blessed we are to have it!

There is something in the church, sort of like a prevailing wind that makes us drift toward severity and away from softness. I am not speaking just of individuals in the church. There is also what could be called 'corporate severity.' The posture we take as a church toward the world, toward our own people, toward people who haven't been able to follow the rules or color in the lines. Divorced and remarried, our brothers and sisters in the LGBTQ family, immigrants who flee poverty, starvation, drug cartels and violence. The fact that this story was almost suppressed gives us pause.

Because this is not unique to the church. It seems true of any organization. Think about our own country and the issue of immigration. Which way has the drift been? It's not a drift – it's a hurricane. Away from softness and toward severity. We're here; we got our piece of the pie – and the heck with everyone else. 99% of us are here because the laws were relaxed enough to let our ancestors in. But now that we're here we want to keep others out. It's a far cry from what our statue of liberty proclaims: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." (From address by Kenneth Untener, ORIGINS, p. 825, May 7, 1987. Vol 16, #47)

How does this happen? 3 thoughts for our reflection: self-righteousness, mercy and compassion.

The problem of the pharisees was self-righteousness. They thought that they were better than everyone else, superior in their sanctity. It's an easy trap, from the chants of 'we're #1' at a sporting event, to 'America is the greatest country in the world,' or 'we're Americans and we're just smarter than everyone else in the world,' which leads to feelings of satisfaction that we are successful and, thank God, NOT like the rest of men.

But that's just not the truth. And it certainly is not the gospel. We all share the same humanity with one another. In the community of humankind, moral superiority – or even the claim to it or the appearance of it – produces chasms that divide us from one another. A sense of moral superiority erects walls and becomes a tool or weapon to give one group an advantage over another. The scribes and pharisees treated the poor woman in this gospel like she was dirt, publicly shaming her, naked and cowering, as she had been caught "IN THE ACT OF ADULTERY."

This is endemic in our society as well as our church, this self-righteousness. It was glaring in the haughty letters of moral superiority dashed off to newspapers over President Clinton's sexual peccadillos, or Tiger Woods' struggles with a sex addiction. What I find particularly astonishing is the statistic that 2/3 of marriages suffer from infidelity. And sexual addiction is rampant in our society. I just happen to know from hearing confessions that a good deal of those who wrote the stinging letters were people who were guilty of these same sins, but they were all up on a high horse about something they themselves had also done, but not been caught. The only moral majority that there is in this country is the majority we all belong to – sinners, and we all fall short under the scrutiny of the Divine Judge. NONE of us has ANY claim to be self-righteous about anything!

Turning the spotlight on someone else's sin merely distracts us from the necessary inner work that we need to do in our own lives. And the remedy is mercy, and so my second point.

Early father of the church, Origen said that "No one can understand the gospel of John until they have rested in the heart of God." It is in the heart of God that we learn mercy, that grace undeserved that forgives sin, lifts up the fallen, restores dignity to those who are ashamed in their sin. Mercy is learned through prayer and experience, for having received forgiveness ourselves we know the obligation that we have to extend it to others.

So why is there so little mercy in our world? Why are we so quick to sue, to criticize, to condemn? I think that the world of mercy is a difficult place to dwell. Not because we do not think it exists, but because we do not think we belong there. It is a place for other people. We enter it only when we cannot avoid it. Once there we look around at our new neighbors. Egad – not them! I'm not one of them! These are not people I would pick! We are in real pain about our fall from perfection. Of course, we never were perfect. We were always sinful. All that is new is now we have had to face up to it. In *A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS*, the betrayer of Thomas More says, "I've lost my innocence." Cromwell replies, "You lost it some time ago. You've only now just noticed." It is the noticing that hurts.

But however reluctant and painful our admission of sinfulness, it can begin a process that leads to mercy. So that the next time we come upon another's failure, we quickly bend over and grab a stone. But we find we cannot throw it. It drops from our hand. Then another sin comes by. We reach again for a stone, and again we cannot throw it. Finally, we bend down only to write on the earth – before we stand to tell the truth of our solidarity with all other sinners in the world. (Adapted from *GOSPEL LIGHT: JESUS STORIES OF SPIRITUAL CONSCIOUSNESS*, John Shea, p. 142). The growth in mercy comes when we accept that we too are poor, often misguided sinners. Welcome to the real world.

Third and finally, compassion. Author Leo Buscaglia once talked about a contest he was asked to judge. The purpose of the contest was to find the most caring child. The winner was a 4-year-old child whose next-door neighbor was an elderly gentleman who had recently lost his wife. Upon seeing the man cry, the little boy went into the old man's yard, climbed onto his lap and just sat there. When his mother asked him what he had said to the neighbor, the little boy said, "Nothing, I just helped him cry." (Ellen Keridman, submitted by Donna Bernard, in *A THIRD SERVING OF CHICKEN SOUP FOR THE SOUL*, Canfield and Hansen, p. 12)

The little boy intuitively understood the truth that to be human is to be wounded. Nature and history so easily have their way with us, bruising our lives with tragedy. Society and culture exact their price, sorting us into categories that constrict our potential and damage our self-esteem. Family and friends lay their own inherited issues upon us, scarring us with the brands of their own intimate projections and betrayals. This avalanche of pain signals the presence of that ancient fatal wound at the root of our being, inflicted when Adam turned his back on God and blamed Eve; it is original sin.

As the weight of injury settles upon us, our wounded heart may become a furnace of resentment, rage, and revenge, ready to lash out and inflict pain, or striving perhaps to unburden itself of the pain it has borne. But there is another possibility: that our heart, wounded by so much human pain, grows tender and alert to the pain of others. We become, in fact, wounded healers. (Adapted from *WEAVINGS, 'Wounded Healers'* in Vol XIII, #5, Sept-Oct 198, p. 2, John Mogabgab) It is what Jesus gave to the woman caught in adultery, and what He has extended to everyone of us in this room.

A true story to conclude.

He is sitting at his desk in his 2nd-grade classroom. Suddenly he is aware of a puddle between his feet and the front of his pants are wet. He cannot imagine how this happened. The poor little guy is so embarrassed he wants to die. It's never happened before; he doesn't know how it happened. When the guys find out, he'll never hear the end of it; the girls in the class will never speak to him again.

"Please, dear God," he prays, "I'm in big trouble. I need help right now!"

He looks up from his prayer, and a classmate named Susie is carrying a gold fish bowl filled with water. Suddenly she loses her grip of the bowl and dumps the water right into the boy's lap. The boy pretends to be angry – but he is praying, "Thank you, Jesus! Thank you, Jesus!" Now, instead of being the object of ridicule, the boy is the recipient of sympathy. The teacher rushes him downstairs and gives him gym shorts to put on while his pants dry out. All the children are on their hands and knees cleaning up the mess.

But now poor Susie becomes the center of scorn. She tries to help, but they tell her to get away. "You klutz! What a dumb thing to do!" And so it goes for the rest of the day: he is surrounded by sympathy while poor Susie is shunned.

After school, the two are waiting for the bus. Susie is standing off by herself. He goes up to her and whispers, "You did that on purpose, didn't you?"

Susie whispers back, "I wet my pants once, too." (Dr. Robert Tuttle, jr., CONNECTIONS, Oct 27, 1996, p. 4)

This compassion that today's gospel invites, is not beyond the possibility of any of us. We have been loved – compassionately, mercifully – by a God that we can never outdo in generosity or love. Any child can practice it – and so can we.

I want to conclude by returning to the closing scene of our gospel. Everyone had gone, and Jesus and the woman were left standing alone. It is a magnificent scene, described beautifully by St. Augustine with the words: "Relicti sunt duo, miseriae et misericordia." "And 2 were left....misery, and mercy."

There is a lot of misery in our world and it desperately needs a merciful church, it needs US. I pray that the church we are becoming will be a church manifestly filled with mercy....filled with mercy." (Untener, adapted, p. 826)