

Have you ever had one of those dreams? One of those dreams where you're getting ready for the party of the year. You spend hours getting ready, guys, you slick your hair back and comb your sideburns and put on your dad's best aftershave, you're looking groovy. Ladies, you spend a couple hours picking out the right dress and then after deliberating over sixteen different pairs of shoes you decide to change your dress anyway. Your hair is perfect and you just had an expensive manicure, you're looking fabulous.

You get in your car and go to the party. You arrive fashionably late. You look through the window on the way to the door, sure enough, everybody is there. You take one more look at yourself in the brass knocker on the door to make sure everything is okay, and then you turn the knob and the door opens.

One by one the heads turn, and one by one the mouths drop open, the music that was grooving comes to a screeching halt, everyone is speechless. "Wow" you think to yourself, "I must look better than I thought." As you walk in, everyone's eyes follow. You decide that the view must be so great. You take a peek at yourself. You look down and you see the same thing your mom saw when she gave birth to you. You're completely naked!

There are many things in life that can make us uncomfortable. Being naked in public is obviously one of them. The woman brought to Jesus in today's reading must felt that way. This story is usually entitled "A Story of the Adulteress" or "The Woman Caught in Adultery" which suggests that the woman has been connected with sinfulness without the opportunity to defend herself. According to the Law of Moses in those days two witnesses were required to bring the case forward. There were, however, no witnesses. Therefore, there is no legal case against this woman.

The lesson of this story is not so much about whether or not the woman is an adulteress, but the way in which Jesus exalts himself above the Law of Moses in his encounter with this woman. He changes its appointed punishment, and re-establishes righteousness on the foundation of grace.

In this brief encounter, we observe the art of grace. Jesus could have taken the path of rigid holiness but that would have ended tragically. Her punishment would be death. He could have taken the path of indulgent love but that too would have been disastrous. He

would be condemned for violating the Law of Moses. Instead he chose the path of grace. Grace tempers the rigidity of holiness and strengthens the hand of love. Grace avoids the sanctimony of holiness and the indulgence of love.

Jesus made it clear that the action of his detractors was as much sin as the action of the woman. Both stood in the same boat. Their obsession with sexual issues only served to fuel their hatred of Jesus. Neither sin is better or worse in God's eyes. Jesus could have easily exposed their hateful duplicity. He could also have exposed the woman's adultery. We would have done that. After all, sin is sin, is it not? But that would not be grace.

Jesus held both his opponents and the woman accountable for their actions. He did not for a moment flinch from his duty of holding all of them responsible for what they did. The men were made conscious of their sins and so was the woman. However, neither party had their sins exposed to public view. Neither the men nor the woman were left to rue the possibility of damaging revelations. Jesus did not make anyone lose face. He simply created an environment in which everyone could find a healing resolution.

This is the art of grace: to be willing to hold ourselves, and others, accountable for our actions and yet be able to accomplish this without exposing anyone concerned to the sanctimonious religiosity of the church!

When confronted with someone who has truly failed should we offer grace or should we exploit them? Do we seek disastrous exposure or redemptive healing? Exercising grace is when we are most like our heavenly God. Perhaps we can barge our way through the walk of faith insisting that people live up to the mark or else! Perhaps we can scamper along on that walk of faith indulging every whim and fancy of our brothers and sisters! There is a third option. We can learn the art of grace through Jesus' encounter with the woman and others in today's story. We can learn to say, "I do not condemn you. Go and sin no more."

Jesus refused to expose either the guilt of the woman or the hateful duplicity of his protagonists. He refused to condemn either party. He ensured that both parties were given ample opportunities to savor the salvific grace of God. You and I can be vessels of such grace. To do so we must experience the art of God's grace and then strive to practice this art. May the grace of God be yours to receive and to offer to others today and forever? Amen.