

“Jesus bent down and began to write on the ground with his finger.” Through the centuries there has been a lot of speculation about what it might have been that Jesus wrote on the ground when he was challenged by the scribes and Pharisees. Way back around the year 400, the great Scripture scholar Saint Jerome suggested that it was the sins of the accusers that Jesus was writing on the ground. Jesus would have known them, and putting them out there so publicly would certainly have caused the accusers to walk away. Others have suggested that Jesus was simply doodling, buying time while he pondered what his response to the question of the scribes would be. But the text doesn’t say he doodled on the ground; it says he wrote on the ground. Others have suggested that Jesus was imitating the Roman legal practice, where the judge would first write down the sentence, and then read it aloud.

Sister Barbara Reid, in a recent article in *America* magazine, has a different theory. She reasons that if the content – what Jesus wrote – was important, the evangelist John would certainly have told us what it said; but he doesn’t do that. So, she focuses on the action – the writing with the finger – and makes a connection with Exodus 31:8, where it says: “When God finished speaking with Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the two tablets of the covenant, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God.” It is Jesus’ action of writing with his finger, doing the same thing that God did in giving the law to Moses, that gives us a clue about what’s going on here.

What Jesus is saying to the scribes and Pharisees by writing on the ground with his finger is this: the interpretation he is about to give to the law is in line with God's intent in giving the law. He, of course, knew from the start what he was going to do, because he knew what God intended with regard to the law concerning adultery: he was going to forgive her, and invite her back into the good graces of God – invite her back to live the life God intended her to live. In not following the law – which called for the stoning of the adulteress – Jesus was making a clear statement to the scribes and Pharisees that the law was never intended as an instrument of condemnation. God gave the law to Moses as a guide to show believers how to live a godly way of life.

We might then ask the question: Does this gospel intend to tell us that it's ok to disregard the law? Certainly not! Rules and laws are necessary for the peaceful ordering of all organizations, both civil and religious. What it says is that our relationship with God is not, and cannot be, contained within rules and law. Law does not express *adequately* how we relate with God.

It is God's freely given gift of forgiveness, offered to us in the person of Christ, – like to the woman of today's gospel, – that binds us to God, that invites us to change, and that challenges us to sin no more.

At this point in Lent, it's time for us to experience the same forgiveness. This, of course, is the point and the purpose of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. This sacrament should always be a part of each person's preparation for Easter.

This coming Thursday, we will have our annual Lenten Communal Penance service, at 7:00 p.m. This is open to everyone in the cluster. This coming Saturday, March 27th, we will have our final cluster-wide communal penance service, at Nativity Parish in Janesville, starting at 9:30 a.m.

In his book, *A Forgiving God in an Unforgiving World*, Ron Lee Davis tells the true story of a priest in the Philippines, a much-loved man of God, who carried the burden of a secret sin he had committed many years before. He had repented, but still had no peace about it. In his parish was a woman who deeply loved God, and who claimed to have visions in which she spoke with Christ. The priest, however, was skeptical about that. To test her, he said, "The next time you speak with Christ, ask him what sin I committed when I was in high school." The woman agreed. A few days later, the priest asked her, "Well, did Christ visit you in your dreams?" "Yes, he did," she replied. "And did you ask him what sin I committed back in high school?" "Yes." She said. "And what did he say?" She smiled and answered, "Christ said, 'I don't remember.'"

So it is with all the sins we bring to Christ for forgiveness.