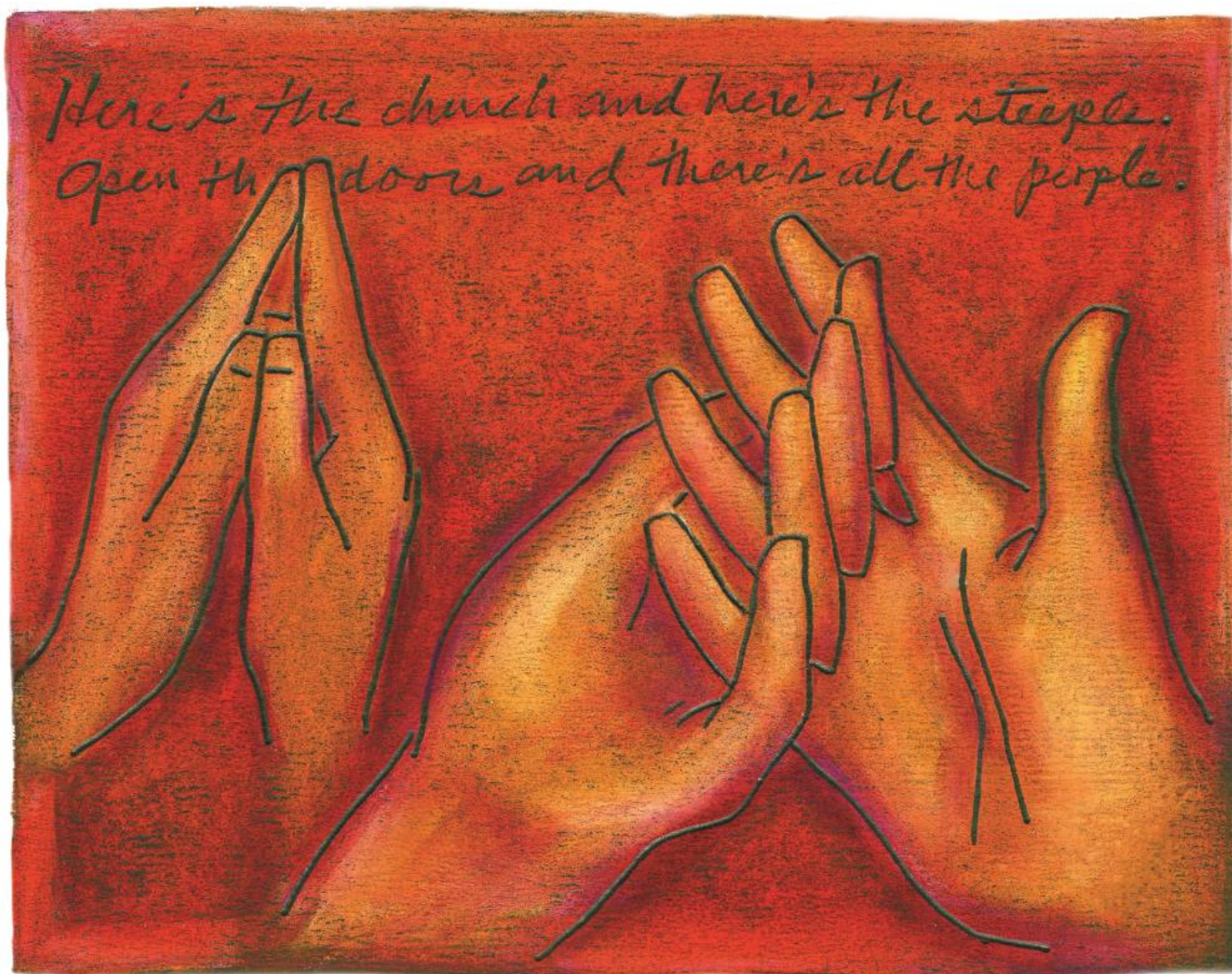


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Over the past few years these homilies for a Sunday in Lent, usually the March issue of Celebration and coming from one starting point or another, have tried to explore how Lent itself is a way that the church is formed. To adapt (from the Jewish tradition) the most compact way to put it: It is not so much that Christians keep Lent, but Lent keeps Christians. The homilies in this column last month (for the Sunday before Lent and for Ash Wednesday) might also be helpful. The homily that follows is for the Fifth Sunday of Lent in 2007 but some of it could be used on any of the Lenten Sundays in March this year. The song verses used are from a collection of ritual songs: *By Heart: Seasonal Songs for Gathering, Interceding, and Communion* (Tony Alonso and Gabe Huck, GIA Publications: Chicago, 2005 at <http://www.giamusic.com> or call 800-442-1358).

When we hear the first few words of today's gospel we likely have no idea where it's going: Early one morning Jesus goes to the temple area, people come to him and he sits down to teach them. But when we hear the first words of the next line, we know at once what story this will be. Some men arrive and with them a woman "caught in the very act of committing adultery." They haul her into the midst of the people gathered around Jesus. It is a strange and memorable story. Likely we all know how it will end even as we listen to that beginning line. But the drama still holds us. This story, like none other in the gospel, describes the postures of Jesus: Jesus sitting, bending down, straightening up again. It makes for drama as it takes us to the conclusion we know but still wait to hear again: Neither do I condemn you. (How these words are a promise to us all!) In the end, everyone has gone away, including those who came to hear Jesus teach, everyone except the woman and Jesus. He tells her to go also. Jesus is left alone, perhaps still bending down to write with his finger on the ground.

So with just 12 of Lent's 40 days remaining, what are we to make of this? It might be a call for the church, for us, to look together at what sort of balance we are striking between being on the one hand a sort of police state, and on the other a very vague sort of club where each of us does pretty much that he or she pleases, believes pretty much what he or she is comfortable with. Every human institution, and the church is certainly that at any level from our assembly this morning to the Vatican, every human institution faces temptations. One such temptation is this: When it

seems that things are falling apart, those who hold titles and offices are all too liable to become afraid. They are likely to dust off old rules and make new rules. They are likely to try to nail down what's right and what's wrong. They are likely to think that safeguarding the church means just leave it all to them: Father knows best. At such times, the leadership may confuse the church with themselves.

What then do we make of this tiny story of the hubbub caused when some perhaps well-meaning men brought before Jesus and his listeners a woman who, in their minds, had broken God's law? We should not miss something rather amazing in the story. It is this: These men listen to what Jesus tells them: "Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." They listen, and they must glimpse in Jesus' words some bit of a vision that there is another way to do things, another way to be faithful members of the community. They have the honesty and the courage to face the truth and give up the righteousness that sent them out looking for a sinner. Jesus challenged the ground on which they were standing, the way they were telling people it had to be, the sort of things they thought it would take to maintain the faithful community.

What we have in this story is a rare instance of leadership listening to another vision of the community. And not just listening, but open to a truth not recognized before, a truth that shakes the foundations on which this leadership has been standing. So they went away, one by one. They didn't ask more questions, they didn't argue. This is amazing given what we all experience of human nature and human institutions. Of course we have no idea of what came next for them. Maybe some of them fell back to games of power, deciding who's a sinner, who's messing up the precious institution, what burdens to put on others. But for this moment they give us a breath-taking example of how a clear and honest word can turn us around.

Whether we have been hard at our Lenten disciplines, our Lenten work, since Ash Wednesday, or whether we haven't really given Lent a half-serious thought, let's turn this morning to those dozen days that remain, and think about them in light of this story.

Lent is about one thing: the deed we are going to do when Lent is over. When Lent has ended on Holy Thursday afternoon, we enter into three days – Good Friday, Holy Saturday, Easter Sunday – that are the very heart of our year and of our lives. Through Good Friday and Holy Saturday we help each other to prepare well for what

this church, ourselves ready or not, will do in the night between Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday.

Together and alone we all do the praying and the fasting to make these days different from any other of the year. And then we come to spend that Saturday night here together keeping vigil, listening to scripture, singing psalms, calling on all the saints, returning the lovely alleluia to our lips, until we are as ready as we can be to approach the font with those who will die in the waters of baptism to live new in Christ.

All of Lent exists to get us to that font. For 40 days the church struggles with the gospel it believes, struggles to become what we are: We are those who renounced evil, accepted the way of the gospel, and then in those baptism waters were embraced by God and became what ever since we have struggled to be, the body of Christ, the church. In a way, once we are in that baptism water, we stay there. It wasn't like some sort of entrance examination: once we pass, we never have to think about such things again.

Instead, ready or not, we are plunged into waters that forever define who we are, still swirl around us. Each year we gather our strength and for 40 days, or maybe just 12 if we start today, we do some things that renew us as the church that is ever being created at the font.

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Through the years of many Lents little by little we put on Christ, we learn the way of the baptized, we fast and pray and simplify our lives so that we may see more clearly what we are doing here in this world, we who are the church, we who are the world. A Lenten song puts it this way:

Marked by ashes we have come,

we, the world so troublesome,

we, the members: Christ, our sum.

Now we pray by day and night,

Keep the fast to clear our sight,

Share our goods to set things right.

What is this "fast to clear our sight"? Certainly it can't be doing without something that is superfluous anyway, something we'll just start again on Easter. It may not even be about food or drink or cigarettes and such. What fast do we need that will "clear our sight"? What things, what deeds, what habits? We have to think about our time, for example, and the stuff around us, about our bodies, about each other. How will a baptized person see these in relation to all the earth, all the world? Can we examine how we use up time, use up the earth, use up our bodies and those of others, use up so much stuff that there's little or none left for most folks on this planet? Now we're talking about a fast that clears our sight: to free ourselves with some hard effort these Lenten days and so have the time and space to see clearly. To see this world with eyes of baptism, with gospel eyes. How will it look? What will we find urgent? What must we pay attention to? Where must we have an impact?

And what of "share our goods to set things right"? When we do what we must to gain clear sight of this world around us, then baptized people like us are going to find a thousand thousand ways to make some justice happen in a world more and more unjust, in a world where more and more we privileged live behind expensive walls. And to make some justice happen in a world where the greed of one generation threatens the very existence of future generations.

We are not just scattered souls each working alone on Lent. We're the church. Listen to another of these little verses:

Strong and weak, be here at home.

Bold or shy, here laugh, here groan.

Gospel weighs too much alone.

So it does. Gospel weighs too much alone. Who could bear it alone? We must do this together. Around this table we make that pledge every time we share a common bread and drink from a common cup, eating and drinking what in truth we are, the body of Christ.

And so we return to that story about how Jesus challenged those men on that morning when they presumed to speak with authority. The Lent we strive to keep, 40 days or 12, wants this church of ours to be as faithful and as free as Jesus was when he answered the question about putting the woman to death.

Right now this cumbersome structure, the bishops and the various bureaucracies, have not had such a good decade or two. Lots of wrong brought into the light. Lots of folks going elsewhere. The respect of outsiders gone. Lots of blaming. In such a time those who have authority grow afraid, like the men in the story. Rules. Control. As if the discipline of the gospel were not enough. As if we the church are to be defined and bound by anything other than the immense discipline of this table, this gospel. And we all can get pulled in by the fear. It becomes more important to keep some people from the table than to ask: Why am I carrying this stone in my hand? Am I building a community or a wall?

Lent is a deadly serious matter for us, for us the church. One last verse:

Hear, O God, a servant's wail:

You, Almighty, now so frail,

Shall the power of death prevail?

This is the mystery in which we Christians begin and end: God almighty, frail and crushed, crushed like the grapes of our wine, like the grains of our bread. "You, Almighty, now so frail." And the question that the church works all Lent to answer: "Shall the power of death prevail?" Shall it prevail? In Iraq? In Haiti? In the church? Thanks be to God! Let us keep Lent and so be ready with an answer.

Editor's note: *This reflection was originally published in the March 2007 issue of [Celebration](#). Sign up to receive [daily Lenten reflections](#).*

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