

WHAT'S THAT IN YOUR HAND?

(We throw stones at times and we always feel justified in doing so.
But stones thrown often kill.)

Do you think they were carrying rocks in their hands? Perhaps loaded up their pockets with them in case there weren't any rocks where they were going? Do you think they were big rocks? Like this one I am holding in my hand? Rocks like this can really do damage. Rocks like this can kill a person. Do you think that that was one of the drawing cards for this little scenario? Was this a "freebie" where they would actually be able to kill someone but yet be justified before Almighty God because according to the law she had committed an offense punishable by death, by stoning? Imagine what kind of adrenalin rush that might be.

But were they really after her at all? Wasn't she just going to be "collateral damage?" Wasn't she really just a pretext to get at Jesus? This scene always raises more questions than answers. And there are certain facets that are intriguing. Everybody is standing. Get the mental picture. They are crowding in on Jesus and she is right there with them. No place for her to go. No escape. And so, what does Jesus do? He stoops down. Why that? Why does he stoop? Everyone in the crowd must look down at him to see him. Everyone is looking down on him. Yes. They are. They are looking down on him. And Jesus knows it. And by stooping down He forces them to look down on him. His stooping makes them own it, this disrespect and disdain for him. He makes them own not only their judgment on her but their judgment of him.

And what of the finger writing on the ground? John, the Evangelist, doesn't tell us what Jesus writes so we are free to develop our own thoughts and theories. Saint Jerome believed that Jesus was writing their sins so that when he finally speaks about who can throw the first stone, they have already realized that he knows their sins. That could be very plausible. Some commentators think that Jesus is just stalling for time. Others, that he is purposefully drawing out the scene to heighten the anxiety level so that he can bring it to his own desired conclusion. Perhaps. None of those theories really appeals to me that much.

My theory goes off in a different direction. I think it has something to do with his finger. John could just as easily have said that Jesus bent down and wrote on the ground. But by specifically mentioning his finger it raises a question. Whose finger is it? Why Jesus', of course. And who is Jesus? The Son of God in human flesh. The finger of the Son of God, then. And are there any instances in the Old Testament when the finger of God is mentioned? Yes, there are. When Moses went up on to Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments we are told that God wrote the Commandments on the two stone tablets with his "finger." The guidance of the Ten Commandments comes directly from God by God's own design and effort. By God's finger.

There is also the instance in the fifth chapter of the Book of Daniel in the Old Testament. Daniel had been carried off in the Babylonian Captivity and forced to serve in the kingdom of Nebuchadnezzar. But that king dies and is replaced by his son, King Belshazzar who is a derelict as a king and just a mess as a person. At one of his many banquets Belshazzar calls for all the golden chalices and ornaments taken by his father from the Temple in Jerusalem. He uses them as part of his debauchery. In the midst of all this, mysterious words begin to appear on the wall of the stateroom. It is the mysterious "handwriting on the wall." No one can interpret it for the king and he is very frightened. He learns that Daniel has such power to interpret and calls for him and offers him the position of being third in all his kingdom. Daniel declines the gifts but interprets the words. God has measured the king and found him wanting. That very night Belshazzar is put to death. The finger of God comes as judgment.

So the finger of God gives guidance and the finger of God brings judgment. As Jesus traces on the ground perhaps he writes the new commandment. "You shall love one another as I have loved you." With Jesus the finger of God brings mercy.

There is also a much later depiction of the finger of God. This one is done in the 1400's by Michelangelo. You will remember the Sistine Chapel and the frescoes Michelangelo did to cover the whole expanse. In the center on the ceiling is the figure of the Almighty God with his hand extended and his finger very close to the finger of the languid Adam who has yet to receive the spark of life. In that instance the finger of God is life-giving. So we have guidance, judgment, mercy, life. All these from the finger of God.

We have become much too judgmental as a society, much too polarized. Just examine the thoughts and language you have been exposed to over the last six months or so. Examine your own thoughts and words during that time. Strong disagreements are one thing; vilification, mockery, disrespect, spite and personal condemnation are quite another. We must stand up and be counted for what we believe. But the way we do that matters a great deal. You know, Jesus said that the measure we measure with will be measured back to us. He is not kidding. No matter what the other side of the debate from our side says or does, it does not thereby justify our own disrespect or disregard for the truth or common courtesy. We must never forget that in every celebration of Eucharist we ourselves beg God's mercy for our sins and failings. We do this right at the very beginning of Mass. And so do others, often the very ones with whom we are in disagreement. Lord have mercy. Christ have mercy. Lord have mercy. And then later on before communion we pray: "Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world—have mercy on us." Five times in every Mass we beg God's mercy. We then must become ministers of God's mercy in turn, even to those who disagree with us, especially in this Jubilee Year of Mercy.

God resists pointing the finger of condemnation at us. Instead it is the finger of mercy and forgiveness from God's merciful heart that is so often offered. Ask yourself if you have been collecting mental stones to throw at our politicians yourself over these past few months. Maybe it is time for all of us to put down the stones. Maybe we each need to be reminded that only the one without sin is allowed to throw the first stone. And this throwing of stones does not stay just in the world of politics. It overflows and it comes home with us. Then we begin to gather stones to throw at those around us who are closest to us. Where will it end? When will it end? Do you know of any other source other than the message of Jesus that will bring an end to such destructive behavior? We are to imitate the mercy of Christ. Let's ask the Lord to help us put down the stones—for good.