The season of Lent invites us to examine our actions, thoughts, character, and our priorities with soul-searching honesty. Using the mirror of scripture, and the map of Jesus’ determined march toward Calvary, we are called to look deep inside, to discover the hidden recesses of the heart where sin can hide and multiply, and then to confess and repent of that sin before a loving and forgiving Lord. This is a private introspection, and it leads to healing and a new start, if we take the path courageously and honestly.

We are not called, (during Lent or any other time of the year!), to spend that same energy exposing and confessing everyone else’s sins. (I used to love hearing the confessions for Italian couples: She went for him, and he went for her!) That seems to be the prevalent pastime in our culture. From gossip magazines to TV headlines, from the whispers shared over coffee about the latest affair in the cul-de-sac, to the
headlines in the local paper, we seem to be bombarded by the public display of private failures—whether those failures are moral, financial, or personal. What is this morbid curiosity that fuels our incessant interest in the private lives of our neighbor? What is the source of this outrage and judgmental spirit that we hurl against the humiliated neighbor, whose worse moment is dragged out before all to see?

These are the questions posed to us by our Gospel today. A woman is caught in the very act of adultery by the religious enemies of Jesus, dragged from the bed to the Temple and thrust in front of Jesus as a trap to see whether or not this “friend of sinners” will uphold the clear teachings in laws of Moses calling for her to be stoned. Of course, Jesus cleverly outwits their scheme, without violating either the Law or his mission to point sinners toward a new life, and the woman goes free. It is a difficult story for many reasons, (not the least of which is that it appears that the sinful woman gets off too easily!) Many people worry that such a story may weaken the moral fabric of society by reducing the consequences for such sins, and preventing justice from running its
course. That may be the reason that this story does not appear in many of the oldest manuscripts of the New Testament. Ancient copyists may have been too scandalized to include this dangerous story in the text. Other copyists put the entire story in parentheses, with marginal notes that it was uncertain if it should be included in the Gospel at all, still others placed the story at the end of John’s Gospel, as if a footnote, not knowing where, or if, it should be included.

But despite how much this story offends the sensitivities of some good folk, it stands within scripture as a testament to sinners to the transforming power of grace, and as a call to those who may think too highly of themselves to drop their rocks of condemnation.

Let’s look again at this powerful Gospel. The motivation of the Pharisees was not just the punishment of the woman’s sins, but the clever trap to weaken the public support for Jesus. How did they even know where this clandestine adultery was taking place, to catch her in the very act? Was she a pawn in their scheme, set up by her captors
from the start? Why didn’t the mob bring the man who was caught in the act with her? Given that Jesus extended the prohibition against adultery during his Sermon on the Mount to include lusting in the heart, weren’t these captors slinking outside the windows and doors where the adultery occurred, listening to the intimacy develop inside that room, waiting for just the right moment to break in, just as guilty?

Notice the odd gesture of Jesus in response to the captors hurling the disheveled woman before him. He does not reply right away, but instead kneels and begins writing in the dust with his finger. This is the only time in the Gospels that we have record of Jesus, the most written-about person in human history, writing anything himself. What did he write? Surely every eye in the crowd followed his finger in the dust. Was it just a diversion, just a meaningless doodling on the ground, to allow the woman to gather some scraps of clothing about her, and some scrap of dignity, while the eyes of the men were looking somewhere else? Did Jesus simply write the question, “Where is the man?” Or was Jesus writing a list of the other offences that required capital punishment
from the Law of Moses—a list that would include disobeying parents, drunkenness and gluttony, disobeying the order of a judge or a priest, refusing to pen up a dangerous farm animal, perjury in court, or breaking the Sabbath? Yes, adultery was punishable by death, but so were those other sins. How many of those present there in the story, or those of us today, could honestly say we have not failed at one or more of those transgressions?

That is precisely the point. As the old saying goes, “Those who live in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones (or is it parties… I’ve forgotten!”) How can we be so quick to hurl judgment and criticism against our neighbors when our own lives are not so pure either. If the entire world knew about our most secret sins of thought or deed, if our most intimate failures were dragged out on display before the entire world, would any of us be able to stand?

Jesus was not soft on sin. He just loved sinners. And he always believed there was a future on the far side of failure for those who would
accept God’s grace, and be changed by it. Notice that at the last, when it was just Jesus and the woman left, he told her that he did not condemn her, but he also told her to “sin no more.” This story in John’s Gospel is not a proof-text for those who would commit adultery, or any other transgression, and think that such failures are insignificant to God.

It matters where we place ourselves in this story. All of us have been that woman at one time or another, whether or not our secrets were shouted from the rooftops, whispered at the coffee shop, or recorded at the courthouse. Like the woman in the story, let us never forget how amazing, how undeserved, God’s grace is. All of us have been members of that mob, with tightly clenched rocks in our hands, ready to hurl the stones of judgmental attitude, community exile, or just hurtful gossip. This text bids us to drop our rocks, since none of us can stand up to the question, “Who among you is without sin?” If Jesus Christ, the only person in human history who really did stand the test of being without sin, did not hurl stones, how dare we? That is the question that loosens our grip on our stones, and opens our hearts to the possibility that we might be changed from the stoning mob into the community of second
*chances*, restoring the fallen to their dignity, and to their future—restoring our dignity, and our future .... forever....