

In today's Gospel, with its dramatic story, one of the things it stirs up in almost all of us, is sympathy for the woman. We know nothing about her, not even her name. We only know that she was caught in the act of adultery—admittedly, not a good thing, whether in Jesus' culture or ours. But like you, I suspect, I've often wondered why it's only the woman who is being scrutinized. Why wasn't the man also undergoing this public trial?

As I thought about it, I considered how this woman was used. First, she was used by the conspicuously absent man. Yes, possibly she was using him too, but in that culture, men unquestionably held the position of power. She was used for his pleasure.

But then she was used again. The scribes and the Pharisees had brought her and were using her as bait to put Jesus in a precarious position. Again, although the woman had done something immoral, it's hard not to feel sympathy for her.

A few years back, I saw a movie called *Unplanned*. It's an autobiographical account of a woman named Abby Johnson who, as a college student, was recruited to volunteer at a Planned Parenthood clinic. Although she was opposed to abortion, she was told that Planned Parenthood, in advocating for and supporting women, actually seeks to reduce the number of abortions. That appealed to her, so she began volunteering.

Over time, she moved up the ranks, with the continued belief that Planned Parenthood, helping women, made abortion less common. She eventually became director of a clinic, but soon began to see fallacies in the claims of her employer, especially when, as director, she was told that Planned Parenthood planned to expand their abortion services, and thus the quota on abortions would be substantially increased. When Abby questioned the increase, she was set straight: "*Fast-food outlets break even on their hamburgers. The french fries and soda are the low-cost, high-margin items...Abortion is our fries and soda!*" She was told that her 401K and health benefits, were there because of abortion services.

It would seem, despite Planned Parenthood's claim to advocate, empower and support women, that they're instead *using* them. As the movie reveals, and as personal experience has shown me, women tend to hurt afterwards, not feel empowered. I've seen how they carry the pain afterward.

I recently had the privilege of serving as the priest on a Project Rachel retreat, where women (and men) wounded by having made the choice to abort their child, were able to face their decisions, the painful loss, and find a path toward healing. What they learned, that they didn't understand when they made the fateful choice, is that it's not merely a 'women's issue'. They learned it's not so much about seeking to control anyone's sexual or reproductive freedoms, despite how it's commonly presented.

There's a baby involved—a daughter, a son—whose fragile and tender life hangs in the balance. And despite being told that such agencies help in situations of incest or rape, taking the life of the baby does not fix the pain already inflicted in such cases. But the fact is, most abortions are not the result of incest or rape. Instead, they occur usually because women are in fear, feeling helpless and lost. We must love them and help them.

In fact, even as troubling as the idea of abortion is, and as much as pro-choice advocates might tell us that advocating for the unborn is judgmental or intrusive, we can't be merely like the accusers in today's Gospel, seeking to shame. Recall Jesus' words: "*Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone...*" As we advocate for the right to life for the unborn, we are also sinners, each with our own troubled histories and immediate struggles.

One of the beautiful and unique things about our Christian faith is what it says about God's regard for the human person: He loves humanity so much that He became human, to make of us sons and daughters of a heavenly Father. As Jesus wanted to help the adulteress woman to live in the fullness of her humanity, so he desires it for those who are experiencing a pregnancy of crisis, along with their vulnerable and voiceless children. He desires it for you and me. Therefore, we do not *use* people for our purposes. We *use* things, but we *love* people.

In the Gospel, after all her accusers drifted away, one by one, Jesus was left with the woman, undoubtedly scared, feeling powerless, and ashamed. He asked her, "*Has no one condemned you?*" When said no, he replied in truth

and love, with a two-part message: First, *I don't condemn you either*. In other words, *I want you to live...really live*. Then he added, *But it means you must leave your sinful ways behind*.

As we seek to be more truly alive and leave our sins behind, we also must echo Jesus' invitation to others—courageously, but gently. Speaking truth, but always with love.