

HOMILY 5TH SUNDAY of LENT

April 5/6, 2025

What do you think is better evidence when a case goes to trial, eyewitness evidence or circumstantial evidence? They both have their strengths and weaknesses. Eyewitness evidence is the least reliable. When we witness something, we do not always recall the details correctly. We do not actually see all of the details and we fill in the details to make the scene make sense to us. We actually fill it in subconsciously so that we actually believe that we saw it. Our biases also come into play. We have certain expectations about what we are going to witness and we are more likely to believe that we saw things consistent with our biases. Juries will put more weight on eyewitness testimony. We want someone to tell us what they witnessed. On the other hand, circumstantial evidence is more reliable, it is more objective, but it needs to be pieced together. Juries put less weight on circumstantial evidence. But in most cases that go to trial the evidence is not clear, that is why we need a jury to make a judgment. If the evidence is clear, the case usually settles out of court.

In the Gospel we have the reading of the woman caught in the very act of adultery. We do not know what evidence this was based upon. Was it eyewitness evidence that someone actually saw them in the act? Was it someone who saw two people come out of a private place and made some assumptions about what was going on? We know the Pharisees wanted to bring charges against Jesus. Maybe they wanted to find a woman in adultery so that is what they found. They wanted Jesus to judge the situation but in his wisdom, Jesus did not jump to conclusions. While he was writing on the ground, it gave him time to pray and think about how he would respond. I think we should follow that example and not jump to conclusions. If Jesus said the woman should not be punished he would be going against the law, but if he said she was to be punished he would go against his own message of forgiveness and mercy. Jesus does not really answer their question but puts it back on them: “Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.” Jesus observed that no one condemned her and neither did he. God can judge us, he knows everything about us, but he never condemns us. Jesus is all about unconditional love, forgiveness and mercy.

We sometimes make snap judgments about people. We never know everything about people. We just know what they tell us and show us. Sometimes we learn one or two things about someone politically and think we know

everything about them but we do not. We sometimes make a lot of presumptions. Sometimes we need to make some judgments about whether or not to enter into political discussions with someone. If a political discussion just leads to an emotional fight, we may decide not to go there, but we must be careful not to condemn them. I have friends that I do not agree with politically, but I know they are not bad people. We have been friends for a long time and I do not want to give up those friendships. I can disagree with them politically and not condemn them. Sometimes we need to make snap judgments. If you are walking into a new situation, you may have to judge if it seems safe. But we should never condemn. If we take some time to get to know someone as long as we do not condemn them, we can change that judgment.

And I think we need to get more comfortable talking to people we do not know. Sometimes we judge that people do not want to be bothered by us. Sometimes based upon someone's appearance we assume that we will not like them or will not get along with them. There were studies done on New York City subways. One group of people were told not to talk to anyone on the train. Another group was told to strike up conversations. The people who engaged in a conversation reported being happier and had a much more positive train ride. Engaging in conversation with people we do not know makes us happier and also makes the people we talk to happier. And sometimes when you have a conversation with someone very different than yourself, you can have a very enlightening discussion. Maybe it is easier to have a conversation with someone you do not know about politics than it is with family or friends. We can sometimes find out why they believe what they believe without having an emotional response. I tested this on my recent plane trips. I usually assume the people I am sitting with do not want to talk. I decided to strike up a conversation with the person I was sitting next to. I had a really nice conversation on 3 of the 4 flights. On one of the flights, two people who knew each other were having a conversation with themselves so my conversation with them was brief, but it was not a negative experience. Talk to people you do not know when you have the opportunity. I encourage you to talk to people you do not know at St. Edith.

So try not to judge people. Know that you have incomplete information about them. If you must judge, never condemn. You may be very wrong about them. Once you condemn you are cutting off the possibility of a relationship. With more information you can change your mind. And talk to strangers instead of staring at your phone. It will make you happier and better informed.