

# A View from the Pew

by Deacon Greg Kandra

## *Go and Sin No More*

*HOMILY NOTE: In place of a homily this week we will watch a video and hear an appeal from the diocese on the need to support the faith and good works toward our neighbors. This week's gospel leading to Holy Week amplifies the message on the need for mercy, compassion, and grace.*

Today's gospel is about second chances.

Someone who knows about that is an Air Force pilot named Joe Kittinger. In the late 1950s, he was the director of Project Excelsior, a government program to develop safety techniques for pilots who had to eject from aircraft at high altitudes. It was dangerous but necessary work. Kittinger never had any problems with his testing, until one day in 1959.

During a test flight, he jumped from a balloon more than 60,000 feet above the New Mexico desert. But seconds after he jumped, his parachute chord got tangled around his neck. It was the worst thing that could happen, at the worst moment it could happen.

His body went into a spin—a death spiral that reached 120 revolutions a minute. Two spins every second. He was moving faster than his body could bear—plunging hundreds of miles per hour. Kittinger blacked out. Incredibly, about a mile above ground, his reserve parachute finally opened, snapping him back into consciousness. When he came to, he thought he had died. But then he spotted the parachute open above him.

And only one thought rushed through his mind: "I'm alive," he later wrote, "I am impossibly, wonderfully alive."

How many of us know what it's like to confront certain death—but to walk away, to be given one more chance? How many of us realize what that really means?

Well, Joe Kittinger does.

And so, I think, did the woman in today's gospel.

Her fall was also dramatic—tangled in the chords of her troubled and sinful life. And at a defining moment in her life, she found herself standing in the middle of a circle of men as they weighed the stones in their hands and prepared to strike. She undoubtedly knew about other women who had faced those same stones—maybe she had even seen them killed. And there she stood, alone, terrified, maybe wishing she hadn't made the choices she did, wondering where she went wrong. Wondering which of those faces would be the last she saw.

But then she saw Jesus. "Go," he said. "And from now on, do not sin anymore."

And that day wasn't the last day of her life after all. As she staggered away from that encounter, maybe she thought to herself, with a sense of shock and gratitude: "I'm alive. I am impossibly, wonderfully alive."

We never find out what happened to the woman. But maybe that's not important. What's important isn't the choice she made. What's important is that she HAD a choice. She had another chance.

*"Go, and from now on do not sin anymore."*

With those words, Lent begins to draw to a close. They are the last words we will hear in a Sunday gospel until we begin Holy Week and begin the walk with Christ to Calvary. But those words tell us everything.

Look back on this Lent. It began on a Wednesday in March. "Return to me," the prophet Joel wrote. "Rend your hearts." And we wore ashes and gave up meat and offered alms. Since then, we have heard the gospels cry out to us, telling us about all these second chances in scripture—about the barren fig tree that was spared, about the prodigal son who was welcomed home, and now, about the woman saved from stoning. Christ's words to her are his words to us.

*"Go, and from now on do not sin anymore."*

Christ's final command to the woman is so simple, so direct. Go, he says. Begin. Leave this place. Set out on your journey. *Go*.

They are words of mercy. Words of compassion. Words of grace in a world where grace is so often in short supply.

Of all the words in the gospel that we have heard over these last five weeks, these may be the ones that matter the most. They are the great legacy of Lent.

Go, Jesus says. And from now on, do not sin anymore.

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*Remember: Weekly—you can pick up a copy of Deacon Greg's "A View from the Pew" column, available near the church doors.*