

Lent V (C)  
20/21 March 2010

Church of Saint Pius X  
White Bear Lake, MN

I want to thank your pastor, Father John Mitchell, for allowing me to take his pulpit this weekend, and for his warm and gracious welcome to me on your behalf. I also want to thank the Youth Social Ministry Team of Saint Pius X parish for inviting me to preach the homily on this Fifth Sunday of Lent, and to offer some reflections on their chosen theme, "The Power of You: Peer Pressure and Self Respect."

The Youth Social Ministry Team has put together an informative booklet about their theme, and I hope that many of you will take some time to read what they wrote. They sent me an advance copy of the booklet so that I might get a sense of how they wished to develop the topic. I noticed a couple of things about their treatment of peer pressure.

First of all, very wisely, they divided peer pressure into two types: "positive" and "negative." They made the observation that peer pressure – which they generally define as the influence that other persons can have on an individual – seems to be a common, even unavoidable fact of life. Because we live in a community and are constantly surrounded by and interacting with other persons, we cannot avoid being influenced by the actions and words of others. By their words, others often will attempt to persuade us to decide and act in certain ways; by their example visible in their own actions, others draw us to follow them, especially when we have a strong desire to belong, to be "part of the group."

When the pressure to conform with others leads us to activities which are actually good, healthy, and life-enhancing, we might call that "positive peer pressure." When the pressure from others leads us to make choices that violate our consciences, to engage in activities that are immoral, unhealthy, or destructive, that

would obviously be “negative peer pressure.” The Youth Social Ministry Team offers us some useful descriptions and even some case studies to help us to recognize when we are being influenced by peer pressure, whether positive or negative, in our families, in school, in the workplace, in relationships, and even in church. You may realize that at this very moment, I am exerting a form of peer pressure on you – and so is the Youth Social Ministry Team, through me – and I hope you will consider it positive peer pressure. The same booklet offers us as well some useful tips for resisting the harmful effects of negative peer pressure.

I would like to take another look at this Sunday’s Gospel, the Gospel for the Fifth Sunday of Lent, in light of the chosen topic. In the account of Jesus and the woman accused of the sin of adultery, can we discern the presence of peer pressure, and if so, what were the effects of that pressure? What more can we learn about this sometimes subtle and yet potent source of influence on our own behavior, the peer pressure that is so prevalent in our daily lives?

*“Then the scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery and made her stand in the middle.”* Before we consider the obvious peer pressure in the scene just described, we might well wonder, what kind of pressure was previously put upon this woman that induced her to sin? Where was the man who had sinned with her? Did he not have an equal share in the guilt? We can at least wonder whether the woman gave in to some kind of pressure from the man, or from the feeling of hopelessness about the circumstances of her life. It seems that somewhere at the root of her decision to commit sin there may have been various kinds of negative peer pressure. Still, the choice was hers, and she made the choice to commit the sin. She was discovered in the very act of sinning, and so now she was being forced by the elders of the people to stand in judgment before Jesus.

*“They said to him, ‘Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. So what do you say?’”* The scribes and Pharisees are now exerting pressure on Jesus: they want him to assume the role of judge, and pass sentence on the woman. Saint John explains to us what their motive is: *“They said this to test him, so that they could have some charge to bring against him.”* In other words, it seems that they did not really care about what happened to the woman; they wanted Jesus to act in one of two ways. They wanted him either to condemn the woman and give the crowd permission to stone her to death, or to acquit her and let her go free. The elders thought that they had painted Jesus into a corner: in their minds, he was trapped. No matter which choice he made, they would have grounds for accusing him. If Jesus upheld the law and condemned the woman, they would accuse him to the Roman governor as someone who was usurping the Roman authority – for only the government had the authority to put criminals to death. If he did not condemn the woman, he was breaking the Law of Moses, and the elders would accuse him to the people, who considered Jesus to be a prophet and perhaps even the Messiah. Either way, Jesus would be discredited, and they would no longer follow him.

Here we have a case that contains two examples of negative peer pressure. The pressure on the woman that led her into sin, and the pressure on Jesus that was intended to discredit him. This suggests that at a deeper level, the problem with negative peer pressure is that in one way or another, it negates human freedom. Once the woman gave in to the pressure and chose sin over virtue, even if we allow that she was not “forced” and so made a free choice to sin, once caught in the guilt of the sin, she was no longer a free person. She was bound by guilt. In her case, even more to the point, she was now a prisoner of the law and of the authorities, and she was in danger of being put to death.

In the case of the pressure being put on Jesus, we see again the effort to deprive a person of his freedom. By pressuring Jesus to respond to their question on their terms – as if these were the only two options – the opponents of Jesus were hoping to bring him under their control; they wanted to silence him, to prevent him from carrying out his mission in the world, whatever that mission might be.

I noticed in their booklet that the Youth Social Ministry Team uses different words when describing positive and negative peer pressure. When it is a case of positive peer pressure, they use words like ‘invite’ and ‘encourage’ and ‘remind.’ When it is a case of negative peer pressure, they use different words: ‘threaten’ and ‘control.’ Underlying the negative consequences of peer pressure, there is a more fundamental problem: in every case, negative peer pressure is in some way an attack on human freedom.

There are, it seems to me, two ways that human freedom is compromised by negative peer pressure. In the first way, the pressure or inducement itself is a form of manipulation; it seeks to put another person’s free will into “neutral” so that he or she can be pushed or pulled into an action. As a result, I get the other person to do not what he or she wants, but what I want. The second way that human freedom is compromised is even more devious. If we define freedom as not just the capacity to choose what I want without coercion, but as the state of being fully integrated in my inner self and reflecting the image of God, who alone is perfectly free, then negative peer pressure has the ultimate result of obscuring my God-given dignity. It reduces persons to a type of slavery – the slavery of sin – and undercuts their true identity as daughters and sons of the living God.

By contrast, positive peer pressure respects human freedom. It does so in both senses of the word ‘free’: it seeks to assist others in making choices that are truly their own choices – encouraging them without manipulation, persuading them without coercion. And because the ends themselves are good and life-giving, the

result of positive peer pressure is the strengthening and enhancement of freedom in the other sense, as the integration of the self in all its beauty and dignity, and the unhindered capacity to rise to the highest level of our ability, even to sharing the life of God.

In the Gospel account, notice how Jesus acts to set the sinful woman free. First, he sets her free from her accusers. Then he sets her free from her sin. It is very interesting to me that our Lord, in his inscrutable wisdom, uses – of all things – a form of peer pressure to liberate the woman from her accusers. Jesus knew full well what he was doing when he declared, “*Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.*” The first ones to realize the implication of what Jesus had said were the elders: their age and experience enabled them to grasp very quickly that, if they continued to condemn this woman, they themselves were claiming to be without fault. Such a claim would earn them the disapproval of the people. And so the individuals in that condemning crowd exerted a form of peer pressure on each other, each of them thinking, “What will the others think of me if I press this case and appear self-righteous, without sin?” And so in the end, they all walked away. Positive peer pressure at its best.

But Jesus knew that merely taking away the pressure of the crowd was not enough to make this woman fully free. Jesus goes on to offer her the gift of God’s forgiveness. It is God’s pardon for past sin, along with the grace and power to avoid future sin, that sets us free at the deepest level of our being. As the Youth Social Ministry Team perceptively points out, people will sometimes use guilt as a form of pressure, in order to get another person to behave in the way *they* want them to behave. Jesus doesn’t use guilt against us, but *for* us. He asks us to identify the guilt within us so that we can give it over to him for destruction. In this way, the feelings of guilt that are the result of our sinful decisions, when those feelings lead us not to run and hide but to come before the Lord to ask for his mercy, induce

us to a greater freedom – the freedom of knowing that the burden of sin is no longer on our shoulders, the stain of our sin no longer darkens our heart and soul.

The assigned topic, “The Power of You: Peer Pressure and Self- Respect,” viewed not only in the light of today’s Gospel Reading, but also in the light of the Eucharist we are celebrating, leads us to a profound meditation on the true source of our freedom, dignity, and power as children of God. I found myself in complete agreement with one assertion in particular in the Youth Social Ministry Team’s booklet, namely: “Above all, pray. God is key in everything we do, and he will help us if we have faith.” The source of “the power of you” is not you. The source of your power is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who dwells within you.

In this Eucharist, we remember and make present again what Jesus Christ did to set us free. We could say that Jesus restored our freedom by allowing himself to be the Victim of the ultimate negative peer pressure, the Crucifixion. He took upon his shoulders the guilt of the whole human race, and allowed himself to be condemned and put to death. And yet at no time in his Passion did he surrender his freedom as God’s only Son. In complete obedience to the Father’s will, he chose at every moment what was right and good, even when that meant suffering for himself. That was how Jesus merited for us the forgiveness of our sins. It is also the example he left us, so that with his help, you and I can live in this world where peer pressure is an unavoidable reality, but where you and I – with the strength that comes from Christ – can preserve our true freedom, the freedom of doing everything we do as an act of love, and never sacrificing our freedom for the sake of “fitting in” with the crowd. The gang we want to belong to and hang out with for eternity is called the “Communion of the Saints,” those whose freedom has been made perfect in Christ. These are our true peers. Can you feel the pressure? It’s the pressure of their love for God and for us.