

Homily for Lenten Penitential Celebration

April 14, 2014

Readings: Jeremiah 17, 5ff; Psalm 51; Luke 18, 9-14

Jesus resisted all efforts to judge people, preferring always to show compassion and love. Pope Francis captures well what so typically marked the teaching and ministry of Jesus. "I believe," he writes, "that the secret lies in the way that Jesus looked at people, seeing beyond their weaknesses and failings" [EG 141]. Jesus sees not only what is, but what our lives can become when touched by mercy and love. He invites all of us to be like him, seeking not to judge but to love.

Judgment, whether of others or ourselves, is very often harsh and blind to many things and almost always premature. God himself prefers to show mercy and to withhold passing judgment, reserving it to the end. The Pharisee in today's Gospel passes judgment on others to present himself in a more favorable light. He is blinded by pride and is unable to see his own need for divine mercy, insisting that he is "not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector." His mind and heart are closed and unable to grasp his true spiritual condition, that like the tax-collector, he too is a sinner.

The tax-collector humbly admits that he is a sinner and pleads to God for mercy. Jesus tells us that he went home justified, while the other did not. Scripture tells us that God does not spurn a humble, contrite heart. All who come to him with such a disposition he graciously receives and easily grants them mercy. Jesus exemplified the ease and readiness of God to forgive, saying, "All who come to me I shall not turn away." Jesus turns no one away, certainly not someone who seeks his mercy. He has come, not to condemn us, but to win us over, by showing us love and mercy.

Part of the joy and happiness of receiving the Lord's mercy is the fullness of the mercy and grace he bestows. In his abundant mercy, he blots out our transgressions. "I will sweep away your transgressions like a cloud and your sins will be to me like a mist dissolved."

Herein lays the joy and the happiness of the Sacrament of Reconciliation: that just as the waters of Baptism wash away all sins, so this sacrament, like a second baptism, washes us thoroughly and cleanses us from sin. To come to the Lord seeking mercy is to open our lives to a new spring time of grace and blessing. As Jeremiah learned long ago, our lives flourish when we tap into and draw from that inexhaustible river of divine mercy and life. "Blessed are those who trust in the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream." Let us then, dear friends, seek the Lord while he may be found.

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