March 8, 2020: Second Sunday in Lent

As I was about to start writing this column (on a different topic), my cat Sally started crying insistently in the other room. I tried really hard to ignore her, but... well, she kept it up and simply got louder. She wanted me to come and give her some attention. I finally gave up and went into my bedroom. Sally was sitting on the bed crying until I sat down and started to pat her. She immediately quieted down and started purring. I spent the next five minutes patting her and she eventually laid down and was quite content.

It's like what I shared with you a few years ago about my trip to Disney World in October of 1989. On the monorail heading over to Mass at the Polynesian Hotel, a voice popped into my head telling me to return to confession. It had been about eight years since my last confession. An argument ensued in my head with this voice, and it would not leave me alone. So, as I was waiting for Mass to begin, I agreed to speak to the priest and ask him to hear my confession after Mass. If the priest agreed, then I would do it; otherwise, it would not happen. The little voice agreed with my arrangement. After Mass, of course, the priest heard my confession. It was a wonderful experience, and that night I accepted the Lord’s call to enter the seminary. There is little doubt in my mind that returning to confession was a big part in my saying ‘yes’ to the Lord. It made me understand that now was the time the Lord wanted me to act. The following September I entered the seminary.

God really calls all of us to this great gift but many of us resist the offer of grace and transformation. I know I did for eight years. Many people ask, “Why do I need to go to confession?” They are seeking to understand the importance of this sacrament in their lives. This question is not one that is easily answered. Formulating a proper response begins, though, with the faith proclaimed in the first letter of John. “If we say, ‘We are free of the guilt of sin,’ we deceive ourselves; the truth is not to be found in us. But if we acknowledge our sins, He who is just can be trusted to forgive our sins and cleanse us from every wrong. If we say ‘We have never sinned,’ we make Him a liar and his word finds no place in us.” (1 Jn.1:8-10)

Thus, only when one can recognize his or her personal sinfulness and the need to be reconciled, can he or she fully appreciate the importance of the sacrament in their life. Therefore, we are a people who need to be reconciled with God. Where does this reconciliation come from? It only comes from Christ. As John’s letter continues: “My little one, I am writing this to keep you from sin. But if anyone should sin, we have in the presence of the Father, Jesus Christ—an intercessor, who is just. He is an offering for our sins, and not for our sins only but for those of the whole world.” (1 Jn. 2:1-2)

As Christ began his ministry, He proclaimed, “Reform your lives, the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Mt. 4:17) This call for reformation was not new. The prophets had continually called the people to reform their lives and return to living out the covenant. John the Baptist, preparing for the coming of Christ, reinforced the need for reformation in his baptism of repentance. What was different for Christ was his claim to personally forgive sins. It is in Christ, and in Christ alone, that we find the power to heal the wounds inflicted by sin. If reconciling sinners is to be considered such an important part of Christ’s mission, it would not have ended as He ascended into heaven; rather, He continued that work through his Church. This ministry of reconciliation in which the Church is united with Christ is intended to reconcile all people with God, with themselves, with each other, and with the whole of creation.

It must first be noted that this role of the Church in the sacrament of penance is subservient to the reality that it is God alone who forgives our sins. The Church’s role is to help facilitate this forgiveness by leading the sinner to recognize and repent of the sin he or she has committed. This role, though secondary to God, is still of utmost importance, for sin ultimately has a social dimension to it. There is, in a Christian context, no such thing as a truly private sin: all sin by its very nature affects the community. Therefore, it is appropriate for the community to have an important role in reconciling the person both with God and the community.
The sacrament is centered on restoring and renewing our life of baptism. In this sacrament we come to experience the unconditional love and mercy that God has for us. The sin does not matter, the number of times we have done something, or how often we may have to return to the sacrament. Our God is simply waiting for us to return in order to restore us to his life of grace. Our God only wants what is best for us. Our God only desires to lead us to a life of salvation. We do not always make the right choices since we have the propensity to sin (called concupiscence). And God in his mercy has given us, through Christ, this great gift of the sacrament of penance/reconciliation. He will never stop loving us and will give us whatever means we need to return to living our lives in accord with his will. He will always be calling us to make use of this sacrament (sometimes in an annoying fashion). The only question we really need to answer is: Will we take advantage of God’s great gift to us?

If you have any questions about anything, please do not hesitate to ask me directly, or send your questions to me at fr.brian@chelmsfordcatholic.org.

Please keep me in your prayers.

In Christ,

Fr. Brian