

Fr. Curtis Miller March 13-14, 2021

Homily for the 4th Sunday of Lent

Eight years ago today/yesterday, Pope Francis was elected. In one of his first messages, the new pope said that “God never tires of forgiving us; it is we who tire of asking God for forgiveness.” So true, and what a beautiful reflection for. I remember those words so well because they were repeated to me by a priest when I went to Confession that same day. It was exactly the message I needed to hear. I hadn’t been to Confession for a few months, and before that, it had been a few months, too. Previously, I had been in the habit of going at least once a month, but I had gradually started drifting away from this sacrament. I wasn’t quite sure why, until I heard those words of the new pope. I had been getting tired of asking God for forgiveness. The pope’s words struck me deeply, and reminded me of how great God’s gift of mercy is. Ever since, I’ve kept the practice of going to Confession at least once a month. Regular Confession is a good practice because it keeps us honest and accountable, and it’s easier to examine our consciences and remember the sins we need to confess.

Since that first week, Pope Francis has kept God’s mercy as one of the central themes of his papacy. You might remember that he dedicated 2016 as the Year of Mercy. Even though that year is over, every Lent is a special season of mercy, during which we have the opportunity to focus on repenting of our sins and receiving God’s mercy.

As of this weekend, we are about halfway through Lent, and we celebrate Laetare Sunday, meaning “rejoice.” It might seem strange to rejoice in the middle of Lent, which is a pretty somber season of repentance, but it is fitting because when we repent of our sins, we have the joy of receiving God’s mercy.

If you’re looking for an opportunity to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation, our parish Lenten penance service is next Sunday, March 21, at 3 p.m. at St. Paul’s. We will have one or two visiting priests if you’d prefer to confess to a priest you don’t know as well as me. If you haven’t been in a while, come give it a try. We’ll help you through it, and even though it’s hard to admit our sins, feeling the weight of those sins lifted is so worthwhile.

Most of us don’t like to talk about sin too much. Even in the Church, it’s not discussed as much as it once was. (Perhaps, back then, the Church was too focused on sin). But it is only by acknowledging our sins and failings before God that we can experience the joy of receiving His mercy. Plus, it keeps us humble, and when we have received God’s forgiveness, it inspires us to “return the favor” by doing acts of mercy, like feeding the hungry.

In our second reading, St. Paul tells us that “God is rich in mercy.” St. Paul knew from experience what he was writing about. After all, God had forgiven him for violently persecuting Christians. St. Paul continues by reflecting that God forgives us not because

of our good deeds, but because of the greatness of His love. Even though we don't deserve mercy, God loves us so much that He gives it to us.

As Jesus reminds us in today's Gospel, He did not come to condemn, but to save us. But God does not force His mercy on anyone. We must freely accept it and cooperate with it. When Jesus shines His light upon us, some of us slink back deeper into the darkness, like a wounded animal, to hide from Him. Jesus doesn't give up easily. He is the Good Shepherd Who will shine His light deeper and deeper into the darkness to find and save us. But if we chose to reject His mercy, and keep hiding in the darkness, then we won't receive His mercy.

It's only human to want to hide our faults, to keep them out of sight. Sometimes we're tempted to think that our sins will just go away if we ignore them. This never works. It only leaves them to grow and fester, like an untreated infection. Thomas Jefferson once said that "sunlight is the best disinfectant." When we bring our faults out into the light, we are able to address them, and receive the healing we need.

The good news is that we don't have to do that in front of everyone in the world. We get to take them into the confessional, where everything we say is confidential, between us and God. The priest can never repeat what he hears in Confession.

One of the most popular hymns of all time is *Amazing Grace*. It was written by John Newton, a repentant ex-slave trader who became an abolitionist. Reflecting upon his sins, he was moved to write in gratitude that God had "saved a wretch like me." (There's a modern version that changes these words to "saved and set me free," but this robs the line of its meaning and power). If we allow God to illumine our lives, revealing all that is good and bad, with His saving and healing light, then we can make our own the words of that hymn: "I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see."