

Well, here we are, the First Sunday of Lent. Less than a week into this season, and I've already failed in my Lenten penance, so if you're off to a rocky start, too, don't worry, you're not alone. But frankly, one of the beautiful things about this season is that it reminds us that we can always begin again, it is never too late. And thank God for that. Whether it's our Lenten penance, our discipline of prayer, our efforts to turn away from sinful habits, our struggle to believe in God at all, He continually invites us to start fresh, to redeem us from whatever failures are in our past, and begin anew.

That is a part of the good news that Jesus came to proclaim – a big part, in fact. Liberty to captives. Freedom to those oppressed. If you are feeling oppressed by the sins of your past, held captive by the choices you've made, your heavenly Father is reaching out to you, inviting you to have a fresh start. The path isn't easy – anyone who is walking it can tell you that. But we can walk it because we are not alone – our Lord walks it with us.

This characteristic of God, to be ever merciful, ever patient, is demonstrated continually in the life of Jesus. Time and again, Jesus responds with mercy when he encounters suffering, mercy when he encounters those who are burdened, mercy when he encounters those in need of a savior. Our God is a God of mercy.

This was in stark contrast to how such persons were usually treated, especially by those who should have known better, the church-people, those who claimed to follow God's law. "If you are suffering, God must be punishing you for your sin. If you are sick, you must stay away so you don't make the rest of us unclean. If you have sinned, we will judge you and condemn you." How many came looking for redemption only to find judgment? How easy it is for us to respond to others in such a sinful way, thinking we know what is in their hearts and that we stand in a position to judge and condemn, to withhold mercy.

Jesus shows us another way, his way. In today's gospel, the devil comes after Jesus, probably pretty confident that he can tempt Jesus to sin. He puts on a big show, showing him all the kingdoms of the world, taking him up to the parapet of the temple and daring him to jump, taunting him in his hunger that if he's so powerful, he should turn the stones into bread. But much to the devil's surprise, Jesus resists. He did not fall where so many had fallen before him. This was not a mere human being, like Adam or Eve, prone to fall for the devil's empty promises. He was human, but he was more than that. He was divine. And so he shows us how the divine responds to temptation, by remaining faithful, preferring love for the Father above all other goods.

Jesus shows us a different way. Just as he showed us how to respond to temptation, so Jesus shows us how to respond to sin: with mercy. That can be so difficult for us to do, whether in showing mercy or in receiving mercy. How can I show mercy while also being just? How can I show mercy in the face of evil? How can I show mercy when the other person is unrepentant? How can I receive mercy when my sin is so great? How can I receive mercy when I will almost certainly sin again? Why should I ask for mercy when I'm not as bad as others? Our world has a hard time understanding mercy.

How much better off would the world be if people treated each other with mercy. It's a goal that we will not reach until the Lord returns, but it is still an ideal that we strive for. We, as a Church, are called to be a witness to this truth, to be an example of mercy. Our credibility, as a Church, depends on it. If we are like the Pharisees, casting judgment on others and meeting the sinner with condemnation, who will listen to us when we tell them that God is love? We preach with our actions much more loudly than we preach with our words, and so we must model that love, model that mercy that God has shared with us.

But to do that, we must first recognize our need for mercy, and accept it as a free gift from God. And that requires some self-reflection on our part. One of the biggest obstacles to receiving God's mercy is our tendency to suppress the voice of

our conscience when it is prodding us. We've all been there. We're all sinners. We've done something wrong, or are in the midst of some sinful habit, and our conscience starts to make itself known. The feeling of guilt starts to well up inside of us, and that's never pleasant. No one likes to feel guilt, right? It's annoying, it disturbs our peace, and it doesn't go away on its own.

But that's what we want, we want those feelings of guilt to go away. So what do we do? The healthy thing to do is repent of our sin, ask for mercy, and then change our actions so that we don't feel guilty again. That's the healthy thing to do. But that's hard. So instead, we often times try to find ways to convince ourselves that we have nothing to feel guilty about. We rationalize that no one is perfect, it's not a big deal what we did, so just forget about it and move on. Or we blame others – my kids' misbehavior made me react in anger, my wife's nagging led me to drink, my boss' incompetence led me to gossip. Or we just distract ourselves, making sure we don't have a moment of silence, so our conscience doesn't have a chance to speak.

Those might work for a time, for a long time, but they don't result in receiving mercy, so they don't result in peace. Mercy, that free gift from our heavenly Father who isn't looking for excuses or justification. He just wants to forgive us, so we

don't have to carry that burden of sin anymore, and our conscience will be at peace because we have received mercy.

During this season of Lent, we will focus on what it means to be a people of mercy: how do we show mercy, how do we communicate mercy, how do we receive mercy. To help us with this, we're going to rely heavily on the video series at [formed.org](http://formed.org) called A Lent to Remember. You'll get something out of these homilies on their own, hopefully. You'll get even more if you watch these videos during these upcoming weeks of Lent. You'll get the most, however, if you participate in the group discussions, either coming to church on Tuesdays in the morning or the evening, or participating in the online forum that we've set up with the videos. The details are in the bulletin, or you can talk to me or a member of the staff if you need help.

The season of Lent is a golden opportunity to grow in your faith, grow in your relationship with our heavenly Father, grow in your connection to your fellow disciples of Christ here at the parish. Our Lord invites us during this season of Lent to experience his mercy in a profound way. Let us take full advantage and invite our Lord to enter into our hearts and show us mercy.