

We continue today with our series on mercy. Every year during Lent, we take time to focus on our own need for mercy because of our sins – we don't focus on the sins of our husband or wife, or on the sins of our mother or father, or on the sins of politicians or celebrities and their need for repentance and forgiveness, as easy and tempting as that can be. We take the time to recognize our sins, our need for repentance, our need for mercy.

That is why it is especially fitting for us to celebrate the sacrament of confession during this season of Lent. I know there can be some trepidation about going to confession – perhaps you had a negative experience in the past, or have heard about others who have had such experiences. Perhaps you're just not sure what you're supposed to do when you go to confession and think you'll embarrass yourself. All I can say is: do not be afraid. People come into the confessional all the time and aren't sure what to do, and that's fine. I talk them through it. Frankly, those confessions bring me the most joy, because it's a sign that this person has just taken a huge step in discipleship, and my job is to honor them for that step, encourage them, and try to express to them how much God rejoices at forgiving their sins for them. Do not be afraid.

I spoke last week about how this characteristic of God, to be ever merciful, ever patient, ever loving, is demonstrated continually in the life of Jesus. Just as Jesus

showed us how to overcome temptation when he went to the desert and resisted the devil, so he showed us how to respond to the repentant sinner. Whenever he encountered someone who was burdened with sin and who wanted to be free, he showed mercy. That is how one overcomes sin – with mercy. We can learn from that example. As disciples of Jesus, we want to follow our Lord, and put into practice the saving truth that he taught us.

It was that victory over sin that was the topic of discussion in today's gospel. We hear that Jesus took Peter, James and John up the mountain to pray, and he was transfigured before them. And Moses and Elijah appeared, and spoke with Jesus. What did they talk about? We are told that they spoke of his exodus that he was going to accomplish in Jerusalem.

Let's stop there for a moment. When we talk about an exodus, our minds are meant to go to the Old Testament. The burning bush, the plagues, "let my people go," the parting of the Red Sea – that was the exodus in which God delivered His people from their slavery in Egypt. That is the image that is meant to come to mind when we see Moses, and hear talk of an exodus. But that exodus, that defining event in the history of the chosen people, was just a foretaste of what God really wanted to do, and which Jesus was finally going to do. Jesus was going to accomplish a new exodus in Jerusalem, delivering God's people from a slavery far worse than slavery

in Egypt, a slavery that affected not only the chosen people, but all of humanity, for all of history. Jesus was going to save us from our slavery to sin.

The way that Jesus did this was a bit unexpected, to say the least. He was the Son of God, the King of the universe – all of creation was subject to him. He had an army of angels at his command, not that he needed them. No earthly power could have stood up to Jesus Christ. And yet, this Supreme Being submitted himself to us, and allowed us to mock him, spit on him, beat him, and nail him to a cross. That didn't seem like much of a victory to his apostles. In fact, it looked rather weak, rather pathetic. Here is the Son of God, done in by an angry mob.

But what appeared to be weakness was a supreme act of love. What appeared to be a failure was an act of mercy towards us all. His death was our redemption. That is how the Son of God responded to sin – not with wrath, not with revenge, not with condemnation – he responded with mercy, and because he did, the power of sin was overcome.

That is how the Son of God responded to sin. The question is: how do we? When someone sins against us, we go through a whole host of thoughts and feelings. We feel angry at the injustice that was done. We feel hurt that someone we trusted would betray that trust. We feel saddened that an important relationship has been harmed. We think about making them feel the way that they made us feel so they

understand our hurt. We think about how they should be punished for doing what they did. We think we need to harden ourselves so that we can protect ourselves from being hurt again. We think that perhaps it would be better to just not have them in our lives anymore. These thoughts and feelings are natural, they are to be expected, and these issues are all legitimate and need to be addressed. Sin is pernicious, because there's not only the sin, but the fallout from the sin, and the damaging effects that it has long after the sin has been committed. These effects spread like tentacles, threatening to cause harm in so many other relationships.

Jesus showed us how to stop them in their tracks, how to win a victory over sin: through mercy. It is not a sign of weakness to show mercy; it is a sign of love, first and foremost our love for God. If we respond with hatred and condemnation and hardness of heart, the sin lives on. If we respond with mercy, sin loses its power.

In the weeks ahead, we will hear in the gospels how we can show mercy in the face of sin, what that looks like in the life and ministry of Jesus. If this topic has called to mind some hurts that you have experienced, some sin that you have suffered and whose effects you continue to grapple with, I apologize for bringing up painful memories. I want to make clear that what mercy looks like is different in every situation – I am not proposing a blanket response that applies universally, regardless of the details of the situation.

But if there is some sin that has come to your mind, I want to encourage you to take a step, and that is to resolve that your goal is to defeat that sin. Decide within yourself that you do not want to allow that sin to continue to touch your relationships – your relationship with the sinner, your relationship with others, your relationship with God. That is the first step towards freedom, the first step towards peace. The path of mercy is a hard one to walk, there's no question. But it is the only path that can win a victory over sin.

And let us all pray that where sin abounds in our world, in our Church, in our hearts, that grace will abound even more, and that we will share in the victory that Christ won for us; the victory he won for us on the cross.