

Welcome, everyone, to this place of worship, where we come together as one body to make our offering of worship to our merciful God. A special welcome to any visitors or newcomers that are here today. In this gospel, the Pharisees complain that Jesus welcomes sinners, and that's good news for us. You find yourself today among a group of sinners, each and every one of us, in need of God's mercy and forgiveness. Whatever sins are in your past, it doesn't matter – we're glad that you're here, and want you to know that you belong, and you're welcome to join us as we all strive to turn away from sin and live as disciples of Christ.

This Lent, we are reflecting on this concept of mercy. Yesterday, the entire Catholic world celebrated 24 hours for the Lord. Every continent, every country, every diocese opened up the doors to mercy, particularly by offering 24 hours of confession. In those 24 hours, there were countless sins forgiven, countless sinners reconciled to God, many for the first time in many decades. Grace poured out of heaven and restored us to friendship with God. If you were not able to take advantage of that, there are still many opportunities to celebrate this sacrament during Lent, and I encourage you to take advantage of them. Be a part of the wave of mercy that is washing over the whole world in this season.

But as we receive this mercy from our Lord, He then calls us to turn around and show mercy to others. That can be a difficult transition to make. To show mercy

can seem like we're letting the person who has sinned against us off the hook, as the older brother in today's gospel demonstrates. It can seem that we have lost if we allow the other to be forgiven. The key is to remember that we are not trying to win a victory over the sinner, to come out on top against the one who has harmed us. The *sinner* is not our enemy; our enemy is the sin. The *sinner* is not our enemy; our enemy is the sin. By showing mercy, we are trying to win a victory over sin.

Christ demonstrated this to us in a real and definitive way on the cross. When he allowed himself to be mocked, beaten and crucified, he appeared to be letting the sinners win. Those who opposed him during his ministry, plotting against him on how to stop him, seemed to win a victory by nailing him to a cross. But Christ's mission was not to conquer them, it was to conquer sin. And it took God-like strength for him to do what he did, to pray to his Father to forgive us our sins even while he hung upon the cross. By doing that, he won his victory. His mercy defeated the power of sin. He calls us to imitate his example.

Last week, I gave a general definition of mercy. To show someone mercy is to release them from the bonds of their sin. We can hold someone prisoner by their sin, never letting them forget, keeping the burden of their sin around their neck, weighing them down, defining who they are to us: "the one who sinned against us." To show them mercy is to give them a chance at redemption.

We are more likely to do that if we first recognize our own need for mercy. As I said at the beginning of this homily, we are all in the same boat. We are human, too. We are sinners, too. We are in need of mercy, too. And if we are willing to go to God and ask for that mercy, then we should be willing to show that same mercy to others.

In today's gospel, we hear one of the most famous parables that Jesus gives to us – the parable of the prodigal son. With this parable, Jesus shows us mercy in action. The younger son says to his father that he wants his share of the inheritance now. Now, when does a child normally receive their inheritance? When his parents die. In other words, this son is tired of waiting for his father to die so he can receive his share of his father's belongings. He wants them now. The disrespect that he's showing his father is outrageous. But his father grants his request, gives him his share of the inheritance, and watches him leave. After wasting his inheritance, the younger son finds himself in a desperate situation, and decides to come back to his father, acknowledge how awful his sin was, and ask for mercy. Before he can reach the house, though, his father sees him coming off in the distance.

The purpose of the parable comes in the next line. How will the father react at the sight of his son? His reaction would determine how the rest of the story would go. There were many different possibilities, and Jesus' audience no doubt had their

opinions on how they thought the father *ought* to react. The younger son had caused his father incredible grief and heartache, unjustly, having him divide his property prematurely, showing him such disrespect by abandoning him and leaving him to pick up the pieces. Will his heart be filled with anger and hatred? Will he chase him off his property? Will he denounce him and turn his back on him? Will he refuse to acknowledge him as his son? That is probably what his listeners expected.

Instead, Jesus tells us that the father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. That is mercy in action. The father's ultimate desire was not to get revenge, was not to punish the one who sinned against him; his ultimate desire was to get his son back, to move past the sin and restore the relationship that he'd lost. He couldn't do this on his own, the son had to do his part of coming back and showing his sorrow at what he had done. The son finally did this, so the father could then do his part and show him mercy.

Mercy is a gift that we freely give to someone else. Mercy is a gift that we freely give to someone else. It is a choice that we make within our hearts. To show mercy is an act of compassion on our part to recognize the humanity in the sinner, to see in them a fallen sinner in need of forgiveness just as we see in ourselves a fallen sinner in need of forgiveness. To hold another person prisoner by refusing to show

them mercy ultimately imprisons us, because we have to hold onto that sin in our hearts. That is what the older son does when he sees his younger brother return. He could rejoice that his younger brother is home, join in the celebration inside his father's house. But he refused, and because of that, he excluded himself from the feast. His refusal to show mercy only harmed himself, and allowed the sin of his younger brother to live on - in his heart.

It is a terrible thing to hold onto someone's sin in your heart. It's like someone handing you some radioactive material, and rather than taking the opportunity to get rid of it, you choose to hold onto it in an effort to remind the person of what they did to you, all the while having it eat away at you, making you sicker and sicker. That is what sin does. So get rid of it, the way that Jesus has shown us, by showing mercy.

We are all fallen sinners, and all struggle sometimes to show mercy. If you are struggling to show someone mercy, I invite you to reflect on the alternative. What good does it do to hold onto that sin? What good is accomplished? Why be like the older son, choosing to deny ourselves the celebration in the father's house? Sin is the enemy, not the sinner. Choose to participate in the victory that Christ won over sin, by showing mercy to the sinner.