

Welcome, everyone, as we enter the home stretch of the season of Lent. I have been preaching on the topic of mercy during this season – you can find past homilies on our website. Next week is Palm Sunday, when we will read the rather lengthy passion narrative of Christ’s suffering and death, and then the next Sunday is Easter, so this will be the last homily in this series. If you haven’t had a chance yet, I especially want to encourage you to prepare for Holy Week by coming to confession and experiencing God’s mercy. We have one more penance service this Thursday morning at 10:00am at the St. Joseph campus. You can also come to one of our regularly scheduled times for confession. If none of those work, you can always give me a call, and I’m happy to celebrate the sacrament with you individually. Being an avenue of God’s mercy is an awesome privilege of being a priest, and I do my best to be available to anyone who is in need of experiencing it.

These homilies have focused on how Jesus Christ took the initiative in showing us mercy. He came and died on the cross for us, so great was his desire to show us mercy. As his disciples, he now calls us to turn and extend that mercy to others. Mercy is the only way we can overcome sin. Holding onto a grudge, punishing the sinner by not letting them forget, keeps the sin alive. Christ showed us the way to overcome the power that sin can have over us by showing us mercy. If we want to overcome that power, as well, the only way is to show mercy.

It helps when we first recognize ourselves in the one who sinned against us. We are all fallen human beings, none of us are in a position to cast the first stone, as our Lord points out to the angry mob that brought to him the woman who was caught in adultery. If we can love our neighbor as ourselves, seeing in them our own brokenness, our own frailty, then we can begin to move towards showing them the mercy that we have also needed throughout our lives.

In this last homily, I want to address that difficult situation when the one who has sinned against us isn't repentant. It is one thing when someone comes to us, humbly, acknowledging the pain and suffering they caused us with their sin, showing authentic sorrow for what they did, and asking for mercy. It may still be difficult, but our hearts are more readily moved to show them mercy in that case and free them from the prison they're in because of their sin.

What about when they don't? What about when they insist they did nothing wrong? Or what about when they blame us for the sin they committed, telling us that we made them do it, somehow making our behavior responsible for the harm they inflicted? Or what about when they act like nothing happened, like there isn't a wound there that needs to be healed? How are we, as disciples of Christ, called to respond in those situations? What do we do when they don't do their part?

In today's gospel, Jesus makes two statements to the woman caught in adultery, at the very end. After asking her whether no one has stayed to condemn her, he first says to her, "Neither do I condemn you." Jesus extends mercy towards her. He is in a position to cast the first stone, he is rightfully her judge, and he says that he does not condemn her. That is his part, and he does it completely on his own initiative. But then he follows that with the second statement: "Go, and from now on do not sin any more." The ball is now in her court. She can go back to her old ways and remain in her sin, or she can move forward, and leave her sins behind.

It is not in our power to make someone sorry for their sins. We can give them this gift of mercy, choosing within our hearts that we will show them compassion, just as Jesus did to this woman. But if they do not repent of their sins, then the sin will live on. But not inside of us. Jesus did all that he could do by showing her mercy. If she chose to reject that mercy and return to her sinful ways, it would grieve our Lord, and it would harm her relationship with him, but it wouldn't change his mind. Showing mercy is as much a gift to ourselves, to keep us free from the power of sin, as it is to the sinner. If we make our mercy conditional on their repentance, then we are giving them power over us. We can't be free of their sin until they repent; they may never repent, and so we'll never be free. Why give them that power? Why give them that hold over us?

The definition of mercy that I have been using is that to show mercy is to give them a chance to be free from their sin. To show mercy is to open the way for them to be restored to their place as our brother or sister in Christ, and not just as the one who sinned. In other words, to show mercy is to open the door for them to redemption. Once we have opened that door, we have done all that we can, and we are free. It's up to them to walk through that door and be free, as well.

If someone refuses to walk through that door, it harms our relationship with them, and we have to decide how to move forward. There are degrees of severity in sin, and degrees of closeness in our relationships, and those matter. If it is a minor wound by someone who is close to us, we may have to put it in God's hands and move forward. Every life will have those minor wounds; it is only once we're in heaven that all of those wounds will be healed and our relationships will be perfectly restored. A part of living in this world is learning how not to let those minor wounds keep us from having loving relationships.

On the other end of the spectrum, there are serious wounds inflicted by those who are not close to us. If they are not sorry, we may have to put it in God's hands and distance ourselves from them. If they are not trustworthy, and we don't have a close relationship already, then it may be best to part ways. We still leave the door open for them to repent, but we also recognize the choice they've made.

In between those extremes, there are countless variations, and every situation is unique. When our relationships are wounded and the sinner is not repentant, we have to discern, in our particular circumstances, how we can leave the door open to mercy, while deciding whether we have to adjust how we relate to the person who has still not shown sorrow for their sin.

Showing mercy is not easy. Our Lord knows this, better than anyone. It is not for nothing that one of the beatitudes is, “Blessed are the merciful,” and the reward for being merciful is that we will be shown mercy. Mercy is a gift that we give to someone else. In this season of Lent, because we are disciples of Christ, let us show others this gift, so that we will receive it.