

One of the strongest triggers for memory is the sense of smell. The scents which pop up in Christmastime catapult even the most aged person back to the Christmases of their childhood. Many people catch a whiff of pipe smoke and they immediately see in their mind's eye dear old grandpa. The memories can come up unexpectedly. But they are not always positive. A seminary professor of mine who was also a chaplain in the Navy reserves, served as the top chaplain at the Pentagon 9/11 recovery operations. He often remarked how even years later, whenever he was in an airport all he could smell was jet fuel and think back to those terrible days.

We often hear the phrase "forgive and forget." But I have never yet met someone who is capable of forgetting. The memory of a sin committed either by or against someone can come up out of nowhere, like catching a whiff that prompts a strong memory. The haunting recollection of life before coming to faith, or the wayward years of high school or college life cause anxiety and the wonder; "If I cannot forget, does God?"

What often causes such distress for Christians is what St. Paul speaks of not just in today's epistle, but quite often in his letters: sexual immorality, impurity, filthiness, foolish talk, and crude joking. It makes many Christians uncomfortable to hear St. Paul's words, not because we are puritanical prudes, but rather, because it is so pervasive in our world. It's right up there with drugs and rock and roll. And, I think it's fair to say, we get squeamish, because very few, hardly any, are strangers to sexual sin.

There's the outright acts of sodomy, adultery, pre-marital intimacy and cohabitation. Such acts are all what Paul has in mind with the phrase "sexual immorality," or as older translations render it: "fornication." The Greek word says it all: *porneia*. The simple meaning is any sexual activity outside the bonds of holy marriage. But Paul goes on to add how we speak—foolish talk and crude joking—to the ways in which we sin. You just have to listen to enough music, watch enough TV or movies, and it's amazing what kind of talk comes out. And then our Lord, in the Sermon on the Mount, aims the Sixth Commandment at our hearts and minds: "**You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart**" (Matt 5:27-28). Jesus gets right to the point: it's a matter of the heart. Think of King David. His adultery with Bathsheba and his murder of her husband Uriah all started with David's lustful heart.

God speaks clearly about all these things in His Word. The living God says, "**You shall not commit adultery.**" And *so we should fear and love God so that we lead a sexually pure and decent life in what we say and do, and husband and wife love and honor each other.* And yet in spite of this, fewer and fewer voices in our nation confess this. Living together before marriage has become a given. Life together with another person in the sacred bond of matrimony is likened to buying a car. "Gotta go for a test drive!" Marriage and the intimacy that is reserved for those who are married has been redefined and made whatever we want, and it can also be dissolved at the drop of a hat. And the crass ways of thinking and speaking about God's good gift of the one flesh union of man and wife have overrun our culture and even impact and influence us.

The majority in our nation may very well say that all these things are fine and good; that it's natural, that it doesn't hurt anyone, that boys will be boys, that everyone's doing it. "**Let no one deceive you with empty words**" Paul says. You are Christians. You know the Word of God. Looking at the manifest wickedness and sins of our day and calling them no big deal, or even good and celebrating them is as foolish as those in the Holy Gospel today who saw Jesus cast a demon out of man—something manifestly good—and said the reason Jesus could do that is because He was in cahoots with the devil!

And yet so often, that is precisely with whom we cast our allegiance. In weakness, or out of ignorance, Christians sin against God by breaking the Sixth Commandment in all manner of ways. Some manifestly grievous. Others in secret, known only to the individual Christian. And even when the temptation has passed, the memory of them is haunting. The words and thoughts which goad us into sin are indeed empty. Sin never delivers on its promises. Instead, it hurts you and it hurts others. The pain, the agony, is quite real.

And then we hear St. Paul say: **“For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.”** If the devil cannot bring seven demons to cast you back into the sins of your youth and keep you in them, then he will tempt you with despair. For you cannot forget. So you wonder, “Has God forgiven me?” To that question, see what St. Paul also says: **“at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord”** (Eph 5:8a). It is similar to what he writes to the Corinthians. There he gives a more extensive list: **“Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God”** (1 Cor 6:9-10). There is not a person alive who escapes indictment under that list. Like the children of Israel, we have all **“[forsaken] the God who made [us] and scoffed at the Rock of our salvation”** (Deut 32:15).

But St. Paul goes on: **“such were some of you”** (1 Cor 6:11). Jesus said **“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick...I came not to call the righteous, but sinners”** (Matt 9:12,13b). Christians are not those who are without sin, holy, and perfect in themselves. Like the first recipients of Paul’s letters, we all were in darkness. We all have been enslaved to sin, are regularly tempted with particular sins. And it is the good and holy work of God’s Law to convict us of that, to bring us to repentance, to fear God’s wrath, because that wrath will come upon the sons of disobedience. God will not be mocked. We are not pretend sinners. We all have very real sins, sins that would enslave us, or that the devil, the strong man, would use to drive us to despair, keep us in shame and regret.

But Jesus is the Stronger Man. He has defeated the strong man and set us free. He is the One, who as St. Paul says at the beginning of today’s epistle, **“loved us.”** He loved us with a pure love, a selfless love, a love that moved Him to give **“Himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God”** (Eph 5:2). He, the Beloved Son, pleased His Father in being the faithful Bridegroom, obedient to every jot and tittle of the Law, pure and holy in Himself in His every thought, word, and deed.

And where God’s justice demanded payment for sin, for your sin, Christ gave it. Not gold or silver, but His holy, precious blood, His innocent suffering and death. His very self. He was the sacrifice, put to death for our disobedience, bearing our sins. And where the devil would snatch Him, smelling the bait of a man covered in the stench of all the sins of the world, he was caught on the hook of the holy divine Son of God, and despoiled of his prey. For it was not Jesus alone who was delivered from the corruption of the grave, but with Him, by virtue of His perfect sacrifice for our sins, He led us out. Out of hell, out of bondage to sin, and set us free.

“At one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.” You are baptized into Christ. He stands continually before His Father in heaven, holding forth that sweet-smelling aroma of His merits, His life and holy death for you. The Father’s continual memory of you is the sacrifice made in your place, on your behalf. And so you also are pleasing to God. He says **“I, I am He who blots out your transgressions...and I will not remember your sins”** (Is 43:25).

This is who you are. This is how God thinks of you. This is what God has said of you. This is what faith believes even when the mind cannot forget. This is what the word of the Gospel proclaims and delivers to you again and again. That word is delivered here and now in the sermon. It is delivered in a particularly comforting way in the gift of individual absolution, where you can lay before God your sin and shame, and hear His sweet word of forgiveness and encouragement for your ears alone. If you struggle with sin, of whatever kind, I urge you in Christ to avail yourself of the gift of absolution. It is why Jesus has given you a pastor. And because the sins Christ forgives are truly forgiven, I do not speak of them. Ever. They are forgiven. They are placed upon Christ, not you.

It is this word of the Gospel that is delivered with Christ’s body and blood. You are joined to He who promises to guard your soul and deliver you. This is what combats the painful memories, what cleanses from the shame. This is what puts to death those sinful desires in you, and strengthens your faith and new life as light in the Lord and brings forth the fruit of holy living, turning from past sins, and resisting temptations to sin. This is what gives you peace. For you know that the day will come when all memory of sin will be gone for you even as it already set aside by God.