

**11<sup>th</sup> Sunday: 2010**

**Sacred Heart and St. Ann's Churches.**

A holy man found that a woman across the street was a prostitute and watched men enter and leave her home. Every time he saw a customer walk out, he placed a stone in a little pile, symbolizing the weight and extent of her sins. Years later, the prostitute died, and soon afterward so did the man. When the man was shown his heavenly abode, he was surprised to find a heap of stones similar to the pile he had built to mark the prostitute's wrongdoing. On the other side of the stone pile, he saw a magnificent house with beautiful lawns and colorful gardens, where the prostitute lived joyfully.

"There must be some mistake!" he said. "That woman was a prostitute, and I was a religious man." "There is no mistake," a voice answered. "That prostitute hated her job, but it was the only way she knew to make money to support herself and her young daughter. Every time she was with a client, she inwardly prayed, 'Dear God, please get me out of this business.' You, on the other hand, were fascinated only with her sins. While she was talking to God, you were talking to the rocks. She got what she prayed for, and so did you."

Often, things are not what they appear to be. We may not know the justifying reasons for the kind of life others lead. Therefore, we are called by the Lord to refrain from judging others. We need to mend our lives, instead of listing out the sins of others.

I was preaching one Sunday about the unconditional forgiveness of God and about God's profound mercy and love. In my homily, I said that God forgives us before we sin; God forgives us after we sin; and God forgives us even when we are in the act of sinning. I insisted that God constantly and continuously forgives and loves. I also quoted 1Jn 4:10 which says: "In this, is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins." This means that, no matter what we do or how far we stray from Him, God will always take us back. After the Mass, many parishioners came to ask me questions about the homily. One of them said; "Then, Father, does it mean that I can do whatever I want and be forgiven?" She probably thought I would say "No" but my answer was "Yes".

The same question is raised and answered by the readings of today. The first reading and the Gospel both speak of the sinfulness of each one of us. They remind us that all of us, without exception, are sinners. The second reading answers the question of God's unconditional forgiveness and mercy, in one word: grace.

The attitude of King David in the first reading and that of Simon the Pharisee in the Gospel reading are similar. Both are unable to open themselves to receive God's grace. There is a double consequence to their attitude. The first is that they see sin easily in others but not in themselves. The second is that they condemn others and so, close themselves to receiving forgiveness and pardon from God.

David is indeed "the man" who is guilty of the sin brought out by Nathan in the parable. Yet, immersed in his own sin, he cannot see it. This is why the initial emotions that came up in his heart: anger, indignation, and fury, but not repentance. He points his finger at the other, not realizing that three fingers are pointing back at him. This is also what Simon the Pharisee does. He is able to recognize that the woman who anoints Jesus' feet is a sinner, and she was. However, his self-righteousness and conceit does not allow him to see himself as a sinner: He, points a finger at her and through her, points at Jesus. Like Nathan, who points out David's sin, Jesus points out to Simon where he falls short.

The woman who anointed Jesus' feet in the Gospel text of today stands in contrast to both David and Simon. She is aware of her predicament. She knows she is a sinner and thus, in need of grace. She knows she has fallen short and thus, has to repent. She knows that forgiveness from Jesus is assured and thus, she can love. Her act is an act of love because she has been forgiven. In other words, forgiveness is first and the consequence of that forgiveness is her reaching out in love.

This is what Paul means when he speaks of grace in the second reading of today. No one can demand God's forgiveness. No one is worthy of receiving God's forgiveness, mercy, and pardon simply because it is given freely and gratuitously. All the good that we do and all the love that we share has its source in God's unconditional love for us. God loved us first, and so we are able to love others. We live in the knowledge that God loves us, even when each of us is in sin. We continue to think that God's love has to be earned and merited. We continue to think that we must be good for God to love us. We continue to think that God's love will be given only when we are obedient and compliant. The truth is that even the most serious mortal sin is forgiven because of God's magnanimity and generosity.

How then are we to respond? What are we to do? The best response is shown in the attitudes of the woman in the Gospel text of today and in the second reading from Paul. **First**, we must become aware of the reality that it is grace that saves, not our deeds. This means that we become aware of the fact that all that we do in love is not for reward but a consequence of being loved by God. The woman in the Gospel text was able to love because she became aware of the forgiveness she had already received from God.

**Second**, because we have received such unconditional love we must be able to say that Christ lives in us. The consequence of Christ living in us is that we will never condemn others or point a finger at them. We will realize that we are all in the same boat and are in need of grace. Our attitude toward others (even if we know that they are sinners) must be one of empathy and concern. On the one hand, we are called to be like Nathan to make others aware of their sin, and on the other, we must realize the danger of being blind to our own sin. We are invited to live a grace filled life in Christ.

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