

6th Sunday in Ordinary Time, 14 February 2021

Scriptures: Lev. 13:1-2,44-46; 1 Cor. 10:31-11:1; Mark 1:40-45

Homily: Fr. Ken

The Gospel narrative today pictures Jesus, once again, responding immediately to a poor person in need, this time a person suffering from leprosy.

St. Paul's first letter to the Christians living in Corinth reminds us that we are to avoid hurting anyone, and that we are to follow the example of Christ himself. A truly relevant reminder on this St. Valentine's Day weekend.

But looking ahead now to this coming week, Ash Wednesday ushers in the start of the Lenten season. It is a special time for each of us to examine our lives: to celebrate in humility the good we have accomplished; and to honestly admit the times we failed, the times we hurt others, the times we sinned. Those times of sin call us to forgiveness.

Forgiveness is an essential reality in human life. At the very beginning of each and every Mass, we pause at the penitential rite, to ask God's forgiveness before we celebrate the Eucharist. And assuming our sincerity, God forgives us right then and there.

How is it then that we can come to understand more fully the meaning of forgiveness? How does it happen? How do we forgive others, and how do others forgive us?

Certainly, we would be stronger persons and our society a stronger community if instead of trying to sever relationships with those who have done us wrong, we tried to repair them; if we tried forgiving instead of exiling.

Sometimes forgiveness is spoken of in sentimental terms. But many people have tried to think hard about rigorous forgiveness, which balances accountability with compassion.

The experience of forgiveness entails four different processes: First, pre-emptive mercy; second, judgment; third, confession and penitence; fourth, reconciliation and trust. Each of these four, need to be referenced.

Pre-emptive mercy. Martin Luther King Jr. argued that forgiveness is not an act; it is an attitude. We are all sinners. We expect sin, empathize with sin, and are slow to think ourselves superior. The forgiving person is strong enough to display anger and resentment toward the person who has wronged him or her, but also strong enough to give away that anger and resentment. In this view, the forgiving person makes the first move, even before the offended has asked. One resists the natural urge for vengeance. Instead, a person creates a welcoming context in which the offender can confess.

Judgment. A wrong is an occasion to re-evaluate. What is the character of the person in question? Should a period of stupidity eclipse a record of decency? It is also an occasion to investigate each unique circumstance, the nature of each sin that was committed, and the implied remedy to that sin. Some sins, like anger and lust, are like wild beasts. They have to be fought through habits of restraint. Some sins like bigotry are like stains. They can only be expunged by apology and cleansing. Some like stealing are like a debt. They can only be rectified by repaying. Some, like adultery, are more like treason than like crime; they can only be rectified by slowly reweaving relationships. Some sins like vanity can only be treated by extreme self-abasement. During this judgement phase hard questions have to be asked so that in forgiving, our standards are not lowered.

Confession and Penitence. At some point the offender needs to move to the front of the process, being far more self-critical than any other individual. The person must probe down to the very root of the sin, and offer a confession more complete than expected, and must put public reputation and career on the back burner. The person must come up with a course that will move

oneself toward one's own emotional and spiritual recovery, to become strongest in the weakest places.

Reconciliation and Re-trust. After judgments have been made and penitence performed, both the offender and the offended bend toward each other. As Martin Luther King Jr. said, trust does not have to be immediate, but the wrong act is no longer a barrier to a relationship. The offender endures the sense of shame and is better for it. The offended are free from mean emotions like vengeance and are uplifted when kindness is offered. The social fabric is repaired. Community solidarity is strengthened by the reunion. Indeed, good people are stronger when given second chances.

Looking at ourselves, do we want to be excluded when we sin, or do we want tough but healing love? And when others sin against us, do we want to exclude them, or do we want to offer tough but healing love?

It is Jesus Christ who calls us to true forgiveness: "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us?"