

3rd Sunday of Lent - C
Exodus 3:1-8a, 13-15;
I Corinthians 10:1-6, 10-12;
Luke 13:1-9
Little Flower - 2/28/16

My Brothers and Sisters,

If there is one overarching theme in the Old and New Testaments, it is God's mercy and compassion. In today's reading from Exodus, God appeared to Moses on Mount Horeb because he had witnessed the affliction of his people in Egypt and heard their cry of complaint against their slave drivers and knew what they were suffering. Therefore, God in his mercy and compassion came down to deliver them from Egypt and lead them to the promised land.

As part of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, Archbishop Tobin has asked all priests to preach about the Sacrament of Reconciliation this weekend and next weekend.

Since the 1960's, fewer and fewer Catholics receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Unfortunately, I think the Church contributed greatly to this decline. First, Catholics of my generation and older were encouraged to make a grocery list of sins, including the number of times. Second, Jesus gave us the Sacrament of Reconciliation as a gift. However, we were taught that we were obliged to confess all mortal sins and that we had to make our Easter Duty, which generally included confession at least once a year. If something is obligatory, it does not seem much like a gift. Finally, many who went to confession did not experience mercy and compassion from the priest. Pope Francis has gone so far as to say that priests who are not merciful and compassionate have no business hearing confessions.

Jesus gave us the Sacrament of Reconciliation as a gift. He wanted us to experience his healing, forgiving, reconciling love in a very human way. Although this might sound trite, Jesus was the greatest psychologist who ever lived because he understood human nature better than anyone before or since. Many years ago, a non-Catholic psychiatrist told one of our priests that when he served in World War II, he initially wondered why he had fewer Catholic patients. He told the priest that he came to the conclusion that it was because we had confession. He found that many of his patients were struggling with unresolved guilt.

When we do wrong, we have a very basic human need to ask for forgiveness and a need to hear words of forgiveness. When we keep sin, guilt, and shame inside ourselves, they can eat away at us. They can become like cancers growing within us. When we ask for forgiveness in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, we begin to let go of the sin and the accompanying guilt and shame and their hold on us. For example, one year during Lent I asked every person whose confession I heard if there was anything from their past that still burdened them. I was amazed how burdened people were by sins they had committed years before. Beside needing to ask for forgiveness, we need to hear words of forgiveness. Although we can certainly ask God for forgiveness in our hearts, when we hear the words of forgiveness in the sacrament, we know we are forgiven.

In the final analysis, although far less dramatic, the sacrament of Reconciliation is a human encounter with Jesus and his healing, forgiving, healing love similar to the encounter Moses had with God on Mount Horeb. When Moses asked God what his name was, God responded, "I am who am," which actually means "I am with you." In the Sacrament of Reconciliation, Jesus himself is dynamically present forgiving our sins through the priest just as God was dynamically present leading the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt and into the promised land through Moses.

My brothers and sisters, tomorrow, February 29, is our Lenten Penance Service. Eight priests are scheduled to hear confessions. I invite you to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation with our parish family. The parable of the fig tree in today's Gospel reminds us that our God is the God of second chances.