

Sunday, April 7, 2019

Fifth Sunday of Lent

Meditation and Questions for Reflection or Group Discussion

Mass Readings:

1st Reading Isaiah 43:16-21

2nd Reading: Philippians 3:8-14

Responsorial: Psalm 126:1-6

Gospel: John 8:1-11

Encountering God's Mercy and Giving It to Others

Neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now on do not sin any more. (John 8:11)

Wouldn't you love to know what happened to this woman after she left Jesus that unforgettable day? John doesn't tell us. In fact, we almost never learn what happened to people in the Gospels after Jesus healed or forgave them. But these were real people who probably lived many years after their encounter with him. So let's try to imagine what happened next for this woman.

Jesus' refusal to condemn her must have affected her to the core. His act of mercy saved her life, not just physically, but spiritually as well. Maybe she was so grateful to Jesus that she became one of his followers. Maybe she went back to her husband to be reconciled. One thing we can't imagine is that she went back to living the way she had in the past.

This is what happens when we have an encounter with God's mercy. Our gratitude for what Jesus has done for us leads us to follow him more closely. It softens our heart and helps us be more merciful toward other people. And we receive the grace that strengthens us against further temptation to sin.

Do you want to have this kind of encounter? It's yours for the asking! The words Jesus spoke to this woman are essentially the same words the priest says to us in Confession: "I absolve you from your sins." Even if you feel as if other people are condemning you, even if you are condemning yourself, Jesus doesn't condemn you. He forgives you. He saves you.

Over these next two weeks, take advantage of the opportunities that will be offered at your parish or one nearby to go to Confession. Let Jesus' mercy set you free. Then spend the remaining days leading up to Easter thanking him for loving you so much. Let your gratitude move you to follow your Savior even more closely—and to be just as merciful to the people around you as he is to you.

"Jesus, thank you for your unending mercy!"

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Questions for Reflection or Group Discussion:

1. The first reading opens with the Lord speaking these prophetic words: *Thus says the LORD, who opens a way in the sea and a path in the mighty waters, who leads out chariots and horsemen, a powerful army, till they lie prostrate together, never to rise, snuffed out and quenched like a wick. Remember not the events of the past, the things of long ago consider not; see, I am doing something new! Now it springs forth. Do you not perceive it?* The reading continues with the Lord telling of all the wonderful things he has done for the people he has formed: *In the desert I make a way, in the wasteland, rivers. Wild beasts honor me, jackals and ostriches, for I put water in the desert and rivers in the wasteland for my chosen people to drink, the people whom I formed for myself, that they might announce my praise.*
 - In the opening words, the Lord says he is *doing something new*. What new thing do you want God to do in your life? What can you do to open yourself more to this “new” thing?
 - The reading also tells us of the wonderful things the Lord has done for the people he has *formed for myself, that they might announce my praise*. What steps can you take during the day to periodically turn to God and thank and praise him for what he has done, is doing, or will do in your life?
2. The responsorial psalm begins with these words: *When the LORD brought back the captives of Zion, we were like men dreaming. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with rejoicing. Then they said among the nations, “The LORD has done great things for them.” The LORD has done great things for us; we are glad indeed.*
 - How would you describe the *great things* the Lord has done to free us from captivity to sin?
 - What are the *great things* the Lord has personally done for you, and the reasons to rejoice and be *glad indeed*?
 - Knowing this reality, what can you do to fill your life with more joy?
3. The second reading opens with these words: *I consider everything as a loss because of the supreme good of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have accepted the loss of all things and I consider them so much rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having any righteousness of my own based on the law but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God, depending on faith to know him and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by being conformed to his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.*
 - Why do you think Paul was able to say these things? How do they apply to you?
 - What do these words mean to you: *not having any righteousness of my own based on the law but that which comes through faith in Christ*? Why are they a key message of the Gospel?
 - Are you able to say the same thing based on your own faith in Jesus Christ? Why or why not?
4. In the familiar Gospel reading, Jesus offers love and forgiveness to the woman caught in adultery in contrast to those who seek only “justice” and the letter of the “law.” His only words to the scribes and the Pharisees’ who attempt to trap him were: *Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.* The Gospel reading ends with these words to the woman caught in adultery: *Neither do I condemn you. Go, and from now on do not sin any more.*
 - Why do you think Jesus’ words to the scribes and the Pharisees had such an impact on them?
 - In what ways can our attitude be one of wanting mercy from God for ourselves, but “justice” for others, especially those who may have wronged us in some way? Are you the first to cast the stone or are love and mercy for others a hallmark of your life? What steps can you take to give to others the forgiveness you have received from the Lord?
 - How do the ending words of Jesus to the Samaritan apply to your life as well when you receive the Lord’s mercy?
5. The meditation tells us that “when we have an encounter with God’s mercy,” these are some of the things that can happen in our lives: “Our gratitude for what Jesus has done for us leads us to follow him more closely. It softens our heart and helps us be more merciful toward other people. And we receive the grace that strengthens us against further temptation to sin.” The meditation ends with these words of advice: “Over these next two weeks, take advantage of the opportunities that will be offered at your parish or one nearby to go to Confession. Let Jesus’ mercy set you free. Then spend the remaining days leading up to Easter thanking him for loving you so much. Let your gratitude move you to follow your Savior even more closely—and to be just as merciful to the people around you as he is to you.”
 - What impact has going to Confession had on your life? Do you experience “an encounter with God’s mercy”?
 - Does it “soften” your heart, help you “be more merciful toward other people”, and strengthen you “against further temptation to sin”?
 - What steps can you take to follow-up on the ending words of the meditation?

Take some time now to pray and thank the Lord for the great love and mercy that we receive from him when we confess our sins and ask for his forgiveness. Use the prayer below from the end of the meditation as a starting point.

“Jesus, thank you for your unending mercy!”

[The discussion questions were created by Maurice Blumberg, who is currently a member of the board of directors of the ChristLife Catholic Ministry for Evangelization (www.christlife.org), a member of the National Service Committee Council of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal (www.nsc-chariscenter.org), and a board member of The Love of Christ Foundation. Prior to this, Maurice was the founding executive director of the National fellowship of Catholic Men, a chairman of the board of *The Word Among Us* (www.wau.org), and a director of partner relations for The Word Among Us Partners ministry. He can be contacted at mblumberg@wau.org or mblumberg@aol.com.]