

CELEBRATING RECONCILIATION

There is a book entitled *The Spirituality of Imperfection*. In it, the author reminds us about this truth in life--the more we live the more we make mistakes. And it's our mistakes that make us better. This "wisdom" is a real smack in the face for all of us who grew up in a German culture that values perfection, things being neat and orderly, looking nice. It is a real jolt for us who believe that God wants us to be perfect and doesn't really like us if we are not trying to be perfect.

The truth is that we are all imperfect, we all have our hang-ups, and we all have the little things that drive us crazy. Sometimes we also commit actions that tear at the very fabric of our lives and our relationships with others. What we do also has an effect on the community as well. Our world would like to tell us that what we do is our own business and no one else has the right to tell us how we should act or what we should do. But what we do has an impact on others. We need only recall all the stories that have been told about the sexual misconduct of priests to know how true this is. Even things like divorces tear at the fabric of the community.

Try as we might, especially with those that we love, we often find ourselves saying, as St. Paul did in his letter to the Romans, "The good that I want to do I don't do and the bad that I don't want to do, I end up doing." There is no getting around this truth. We are incomplete, we are broken, we hurt others especially those we love the most. If we are honest with ourselves, we can all recall these experiences. We can all recall the feelings of being "out of synch" with the people we love. We can tell, in their words and their body language that there has been a break in our relationship. Things are not good.

Now it would be a great tragedy if, after going through these experiences, all we could say is "that's the way it is." There is no possibility to mend a broken relationship, soothe a feeling of hurt and disappointment. The good news, in fact the great news, is that with God it doesn't end there. With God there is always the possibility to begin again. The gift of our faith is that we know that God makes all things new again. What a wonderful thing to experience. In the relationship between husband and wife, parent and child, brother and sister, friend and community—despite the fact that we are broken, that we are not perfect, that we all make mistakes, God makes all things new again.

RECONCILIATION IS CELEBRATION!

This is such great news that we need to celebrate it. Shout it out at the top of our voices. Come together and remind each other lest we forget. That's why we have such celebrations as First Reconciliation. It is, above all else, a celebration of God's power to make all things new for us.

Contrast this spirit, if you will, with the experiences we have of confession. Going to confession, the Sacrament of Reconciliation, or whatever term we use, conjures up different images for different people. For those of you who are older, (over 45), you may have memories of "going to confession." Certainly for your parents there are memories of going into the confessional, which was often a dark and somewhat mysterious and scary place, to recite to the priest a list of things we have done wrong. As a child this list might include such things as fighting with my brothers and sisters, disobeying my parents, lying, etc. etc.

On a feeling level, there was often a sense of dread and apprehension associated with going to confession. It was a little bit like the feeling one might have anticipating a visit to the doctor or the dentist. When it was over, there was a sense of relief a kind of "glad that's over" feeling. As we prepared young children for this experience we often spent time trying to reassure them that nothing bad was going to happen, that there was no need to be afraid.

Contrast this experience with the experience of many people under the age of 45. For many of these people the question is “why do we have to confess our sins to a priest.” I can talk directly to God. For them, going to confession is often irrelevant and even unnecessary. As a matter of fact, most people today don’t go to individual confession anymore.

It seems to me there is something missing in both experiences. It certainly seems out of place to try to assure people that “nothing bad is going to happen to them when they come to confession.” That doesn’t seem to fit in with the notion that God loves us and wants us to know that there is always a chance to begin again. On the other hand, looking at confession as irrelevant or meaningless seems to miss the point as well. We certainly are able to pray to God in private, but it is in community that we learn about forgiveness. It is in telling our story and hearing the stories of others that we come to know God’s love and forgiveness.

What we are trying to do is to help children learn two things. First we all make mistakes, we all do things that are wrong. In short, we all sin. Second, we all need to remember that we have a God who loves us and helps us to begin again. This lesson is not something we learn just once and then forget about it. It’s really a way of life. It’s a way of life that calls me to continually ask for forgiveness and to continually say I’m sorry. It’s a way of life that children need to learn. The place they will learn that is from you. As parent, you are their first teachers in the ways of faith.

They will learn about forgiveness if they see it practiced in your home. They will learn how to say, “I’m sorry” if they see you practicing that in your life. And they will come to celebrate this forgiveness in the Sacrament of Reconciliation when they see you celebrating it.

It would be a great tragedy if you and your child came to celebrate “First Reconciliation” and after it was over and done with, it was never heard of or thought about again. First reconciliation is followed by second, and third and fourth and it goes on and on. How long? As long as you live.

HOW DO WE CELEBRATE RECONCILIATION?

There are many ways we celebrate God’s forgiveness.

- Jesus reminds us that anytime we turn to him with a humble and contrite heart, we are forgiven.
- But there are also ways we celebrate this forgiveness in a public way. The first is when we come together for Mass. If you listen to many of the prayers at Mass you will hear words like “through this Eucharist, grant us forgiveness of our sins.”
- A second way we celebrate forgiveness is when we come together for a Communal Penance Service. Gathering together as a community reminds us that our sins affect others, whether we think so or not. Even more, we are reminded that sin is not just limited to something that an individual does but also includes things we, as a community have done or even failed to do.
- A final way we celebrate forgiveness is through the individual celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation—what most people refer to when they say “going to confession.” The wisdom of our church’s lived experience tells us that when we have committed a serious sin, (what we have referred to in the past as a “mortal sin,”) it is important to be able to talk to someone (in this case, the priest as a representative of the church community) to get this serious matter “off our chest” and to hear that we have been forgiven.

Throughout the year, we offer the children of our parish two opportunities to celebrate Reconciliation. During Advent, we bring each class together for a common celebration of forgiveness. During this prayer time, we focus on these questions: What have we done, as a group, that is most reflective of being like Jesus. What have we done that has gotten us off the track? Where have we failed, as a group, to do the things Jesus has asked of us. During Lent, we give each of our students a chance to experience the individual Celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. As we meet with each person individually we ask them to focus on these questions: What have I done that I am proud of? What have I done that is not being like Jesus asked us to live?