

Divine Mercy Sunday (Year A) – April 23, 2017

ACTS 2:42-47; PS 118:2-4, 13-15, 22-24; 1 PT 1:3-9; JN 20:19-31

Being around Jesus all the time is **no** guarantee that a person will “get it”.

Consider the Apostles.

They spent *three years* with Jesus, but *at the critical moment of decision*, one **denied** him; **another** betrayed him, and all but John the Apostle **abandoned** him at his hour of greatest human need. Even after witnessing **miracles**...and even after Jesus **told them** that he would rise “*on the third day*” (cf. Lk 18:33), Thomas the Apostle refused to believe the word of his companions who had “*seen the Lord*” risen from the dead (cf. Jn 20:25).

But the undeniable fact is that, *even if Jesus’ followers don’t always “get it”* — **even if we fail daily to remain faithful to Jesus because of our sins** — being around Jesus all the time **does** tend to “seep in” to a greater or lesser degree, depending upon the person.

Choosing deliberate, conscious exposure to his grace cannot be without effect in one who sincerely strives to be a good disciple, despite daily failures and falls.

Here’s a real-life example — **a glimmer of goodness...couched in tragedy**. You’ve probably heard about 74-year old Robert Godwin Sr. who was shot and killed in Cleveland a week ago today while walking home from Easter dinner with his family.

According to one news report:

Police said that the suspect, 37-year-old Steve Stephens, apparently chose his victim at random...

Mourning family members...said that despite their grief, they forgive their father’s killer...Tonya Godwin Baines...said that *it was her slain father who taught her, through the example of his life, how to forgive.*

Let’s pause here and consider something specific that this slain man had in common with Jesus. Like the slain Jesus, this slain father taught his followers — in this case, his children — how to forgive. Daughter Tonya described it this way:

“It’s just the way my heart is, it’s the right thing to do. And so, I just would want [the killer] to know that even in his worst state, he’s loved...that God loves him, even in the bad stuff that he did to my dad...even though he’s going to have to go through many things to get better, there’s worth in him. And as long as there’s life in him, there is hope for him too...*I could not do that if I did not know God, if I didn’t know him as my God and my savior, I could not forgive that man...*”

<http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/family-of-facebook-murder-victim-we-forgive-the-killer-81689/>

As is clear from *her own words*—the mercy she is able to extend to someone who robbed her of her beloved dad—is truly **Divine Mercy**—it is God’s own mercy. Listen again to her words:

“I could not do that if I did not know God, if I didn’t know him as my God and my savior, I could not forgive that man...”

By virtue of Baptism and her faith in Jesus...Jesus **lives** in Tonya; his mercy **flows through** her; and **extends to the person** she’s forgiving, even as it **heals her** in the process. *It’s easy to forgive easy things.* But when something occurs as tragic as what the Godwin family experienced, it takes **extraordinary**—indeed, *divine*—**mercy** to overcome the far more common human tendency toward **hatred** and **vengeance**.

What is so **remarkable** in this family’s willingness to forgive something so utterly horrible is also *incomprehensible* to someone *without* faith in Jesus. That’s why the family’s merciful act stands in such stark contrast, not only to the **evil** that has touched their lives, but especially to the **way** human beings typically respond.

But simply **being** connected to Jesus through Baptism and **having** faith is not enough. We have to make a **conscious choice**—*as the Godwin family has done*—to **cooperate** with the grace Jesus offers us.

But it doesn’t even end **there**. Jesus takes it even *further*...as anyone who knows Jesus has come to expect of him.

Every Christian already possesses both the **ability** and the *responsibility* to forgive offenses committed **against them** by another. If I offend you, you can choose to either forgive me or not to forgive me...and vice versa.

So, in today's Gospel passage, when Jesus breathed on the Apostles and said to them...

“Receive the holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.” (Jn 20:22-23)...

He wasn't giving them a bigger dose of what they **already** possessed—the ability to forgive offenses committed against **themselves**. There would have been nothing remarkable about that.

No...Jesus gave his Apostles *his own Divine Authority* to forgive all confessed sins, even to forgive the sins of **Person A**, committed against **Person B**.

Jesus is so intent on spreading his Mercy to the greatest extent possible, that he conferred *his own power and authority* on his first **priests**—his first **bishops**—the *Apostles*. And that authority is passed on to *every validly ordained Catholic priest*. So, when a person comes to the **Sacrament of Penance** and receives absolution, it is, in fact, **Jesus** who forgives their sins.

In fact, when *any* Sacrament is celebrated, it is Jesus himself, working through the priest—or in some cases, the deacon—to confer the grace. And **Sacramental grace is, itself, the very fruit of Jesus' self-sacrifice on the Cross.**

This helps us understand why, when Jesus appeared in his risen, glorified body, he retained the wounds in his hands and his side, as we saw in today's Gospel passage.

St. Bede explained that Jesus kept his wounds, **“that He may convince those redeemed in His blood, how mercifully they have been helped, as He exposes before them the traces of the same death.”**

<http://blog.adw.org/2017/04/jesus-resurrected-body-still-wounds/>

Staying connected with Jesus, then, means staying connected with the Sacraments—particularly **Confession** and **Eucharist**. In **Confession**, we receive mercy and forgiveness, but are likewise expected to extend the same to others. At **Mass**, we hear the Word of God proclaimed and then see with our own eyes the **“word become flesh”** (cf. Jn 1:14), before taking Jesus into our **bodies** and **souls** at Holy Communion.

In a passage from today's **2nd Reading**, we see the rudimentary elements of Mass in

the public gatherings and then see how the communal gathering was then connected to home life.

[The Christians in Jerusalem] devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers...Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area and to breaking bread in their homes. (Acts 2:42, 46)

The primitive roots of the Mass—evident here—were present in the communal gatherings...and permeated **daily** life at home. Contact with Jesus—through these particular means—touched every aspect of their lives and helps explain why this little band of believers eventually outlived the greatest empire in history up to that point, **even as that powerful empire severely persecuted the early Church.**

The blessing at the beginning of **Peter's 1st New Testament Letter** says it all:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who in his great mercy gave us a new birth to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead... (1 Pet 1:3)

God the Father—*through Jesus*—has made possible our salvation—has given us cause for **hope**—and continually pours out the grace of his merciful act through the Sacraments of *the Church that Jesus established.*

But it is a **hope**...not a *guarantee.*

The gift has been given, but **we**, the *recipients*, must **activate** that gift.

In the earliest times of the Church, we see the fruit of that “activation” in the first community of believers. In our own day, we see the fruit of that “activation” in the extraordinary forgiveness of a vicious murderer by the family of the murdered man. Later in his same New Testament Letter, **Peter**—borrowing from the **Book of Proverbs**—writes:

...if the righteous one is barely saved, where will the godless and the sinner appear? (1 Pet 4:18)

Imagine what we would be **without** Jesus...without his grace in the Sacraments!

On the other hand, imagine how **much more we will be** with regular contact **with** Jesus—especially the teaching of the Apostles, the breaking of the bread, and the prayers...**at Mass**...every Sunday...and more often, when possible.

Jesus showed the Apostles **his hands** when he appeared to them in the upper room. We must give **our hand** to Jesus and let him lead us—**by his Divine Mercy**—to the supernatural holiness for which we have been created.

It wasn't just to the Apostles in the upper room that Jesus said:

As the Father has sent me, so I send you. (Jn 20:21)

Jesus sent them out **forgiven**...and *ready to forgive*.

And he sends **us** the same way.