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The joy of being forgiven

Patricia Datchuck Sánchez | Feb. 19, 2012

An underlying joy can be detected in today?s first reading and Gospel, and the reason for that joy is forgiveness. In today?s first reading, Deutero-Isaiah assures the exiled Israelites that God has forgiven them. Their sins are no more. Nothing exists of their former transgressions; therefore, they should surrender their guilt and their sad memories in order to welcome the newness God has created in them.

We find a similarly palpable joy when we listen to the story of the paralytic. He is not only cured of his physical maladies by Jesus, he is also forgiven. His joy and that of his friends is matched by the astonishment of the crowds, who are moved to glorify God.

As we reflect on the experiences of the Israelites and the unnamed paralytic at Capernaum, we might also turn our attention inward to consider our own experiences of forgiveness and the resulting joy we knew. Probably all of us have known the happiness of being reconciled with a friend or family member after some hurt has come between us. True forgiveness -- that is, forgiveness without grudges, without ever bringing up the incident again -- is a healing experience that breathes new life into a relationship. This quality of forgiveness is invigorating and noble because it reflects the quality of the forgiveness of God.

Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time
Isaiah 43:18-19, 21-22, 24-25
Psalm 41
22
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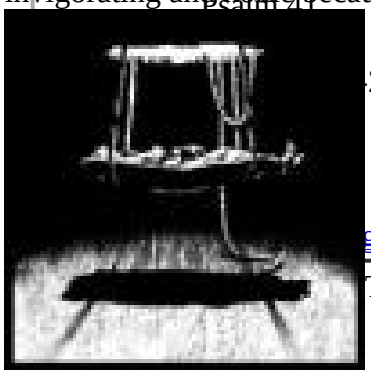

Too often, however, the forgiveness we experience sacramentally does not bring us such excitement or contentment. As adults, our time in the confessional or in church may have become too routine to produce enthusiasm. But it probably was not always so. When I was a child, my experience was quite different, even if my motivation may not have been the purest. My parents were concerned that we children keep abreast of our religious formation, so my mother made a deal with me. If I went to CCD and confession every Saturday morning, I could go the movies every Saturday afternoon. Willingly, I rode the two miles to the base chapel on my bike; eagerly I waited my turn to tell my sins; and even more happily did I slip out of church, feeling holy and free with visions of Ramar, King of the Jungle, dancing in my head.

While dangling such a carrot may be effective in motivating a child to experience God?s gift of forgiveness, one of the challenges of maturity is finding a purer and more honest motivation. Israel understood its need for forgiveness when its people found themselves bereft of all they cherished. There, in the void of their imposed exile, they began to realize anew their need for God. In their brokenness, they were assured of God?s healing and forgiveness. Brokenness also led the paralytic and his friends to seek out Jesus. In search of a whole and healed body, the paralytic was also to experience the holiness of forgiveness.

Like the Israelites, we often find ourselves in exiles of our own making. We withdraw from people just when we need them most. In our sin, we hold God and others at arm?s length. Even in this self-imposed isolation, God?s grace can still penetrate. Through the power of grace, however it is extended, there is the opportunity for forgiveness and for a new beginning. Perhaps the most wonderful gift of all is the promise of God: ?Your sins I remember no more.?

As with the paralytic, we may sometimes be powerless to help ourselves. We may be too broken to realize our need for healing. It is then that God sends us grace in the form of friends whose care leads us to help and to wholeness.

Standing on the brink of Lent, it is good for us to remember God?s willingness to heal sinners, to mend the broken and to reconcile all who have grown apart from God and from one another because of human weakness. Rather than dread, joy should fill our hearts; rather than guilt, gratitude should lighten our step. God remembers not the sins of our past. This assurance challenges us to let go of the worries that age us in order to skip like a child and experience the forgiveness that awaits us all.

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[1] http://www.usccb.org/bible/readings/021912.cfm