

Lent: Overcoming Sin – Embracing Grace

First Sunday of Lent at Holy Family Catholic Church, Cycle A 2014

Genesis 2: 7-9; 3:1-7; Romans 5: 12, 17-19; Mathew 4:1-11

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Peace be with you! Last year on this Sunday I preached on the temptations of Christ. This year I'd like to cast a light on the second reading from the "Letter of St. Paul to the Romans." Two key words appear in this text: sin and grace.

Let's start with grace. To explain the concept of grace, I'd like start with the fact that I love to mountain bike and to cross country ski in the very same place – along Icicle Creek – just outside of Leavenworth.

In the summer when I bike up Icicle Creek road, you can't see the creek, but you can hear the murmuring of the water behind the deciduous trees. The coniferous trees up high are a solid block of forest green. Mud tracks sometimes mark the mountain trail made by previous bikers. The trail is scatter with debris like pine needles and pieces of gravel. The trail, itself, rides a little bit rough when we moving off the paved road and onto the forest road.

But when I've cross-country skied in the winter it's a totally different view. The trail is not longer dark brown but snow-white. The snow on the trail allows the cross-country skier to see little animal tracks. In winter, the skier can – not only hear the creek -- but can actually see Icicle Creek because the deciduous trees have dropped their leaves. Even the coniferous trees on the mountainside stand out. No longer a solid block of forest green, the snow makes each branch and each bow of the coniferous trees stand out. The sunlight on the snow causes the trees to sparkle in beauty.

It's still the Icicle Creek trail with the same terrain and the same trees. But the snow allows us to see the world differently. Grace – God's grace – is like snow. It helps us see the everyday different – beautifully – charged and highlight with God's presence.

So what is sin? It's precisely that tendency not to see ALL of reality. It's our tendency to loose "perspective" in our daily actions. We need God's grace – the beauty of God's grace – to help us see our daily lives with a depth and perception that comes when we see from God's perspective.

This is why God comes to us in Jesus, draws near to us and – without loosing his divinity – takes on our humanity. Because he is like us in all things but sin he overcomes human sin by embodying the fullness of God's grace. As St. Paul proclaims to the Romans in our second reading today:

"But death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who did not sin after the pattern of the trespass of Adam, who is the type of the one who was to come. But the gift is not like the transgression. For if by the transgression of the one, the many died, how

much more did the grace of God and the gracious gift of the one man Jesus Christ overflow for the many.”

St. Paul consistently uses in describing sin: ἁμαρτία. There are a number of words for sin used throughout the Old Testament. As a former Jewish scholar who'd converted to Christianity St. Paul would have been familiar with all of them. Yet St. Paul rather consistently uses this one word in his writing to the early Church when he wants to talk about sin: ἁμαρτία

St. Paul borrows this term ἁμαρτία from the Greek sporting world. Having just come off the winter Olympics some of you may have watched the competition call the Biathlon. It's a combination of skiing and shooting. The word ἁμαρτία actually derives from archery and the term means “to miss the mark.”

This might help explain – not only the steep demands of Catholic moral teaching – but the extreme mercy that comes through the Church's sacraments – especially the Sacrament of Penance.

We live in a world that wants to dial back the Church's steep demands. We see opinion polls and survey taken – even of ordinary Catholics – wanting a change in Church teaching, an easing up in the area of sexuality even as so many ignore the Church's stringent call for immigration reform in our country and justice for the poor and marginal in our midst.

Yet the extreme mercy and extreme forgiveness of a God who takes on our humanity so fully that he dies in horrific crucifixion might cause us to realize that the way to happiness comes – not by moving the target of Church teaching around – but by allowing ourselves to be part of a Church community that coaches us to the holiness of the saints.

Really, when it comes down to it, the only difference between a saint and a sinner is that a saint can see that he is a sinner but a sinner does not see this. Saints are basically converted sinners. Perhaps this is why in his first press interview as the new Holy Father, when asked the question “Who are you?” Pope Francis answers: “I am a sinner.” Pope Francis went on to explain: “I am a sinner, but I trust in the infinite mercy and patience of our Lord Jesus Christ, and I accept in a spirit of penance.”

Friends, as we gather today, I know we are in a variety of places in our journey of faith. Some here today – the catechumens – are preparing for baptism, confirmation and Eucharist at the Easter Vigil. Some – our candidates – have already been baptized in another faith and are preparing to profess faith in the Catholic Church. Some have been baptized Catholic but never catechized and are wishing to complete their initiation into the Catholic Church.

But God's grace shines on us all – illuminating our path – marking the features of our daily life – and helping us become a better aim of the love that he has first given to us. My hope and prayer for all of you is that through the grace of the Easter Sacraments you

make see yourselves as saved and thus free to become the best person God already created you to be. Peace be with you!