

4th Sunday of Lent B

Do you find yourself at times engaged in personally destructive behavior but you are unable to stop it for very long? If so, you might be able to identify with the Jewish people of the Old Testament. Time after time they sin and time after time God forgives them. We have an example of this in the first reading today from the Old Testament Book of Chronicles.

The reading begins by informing us that all have sinned... the princes, the priests as well as the ordinary person on the street. We learn that early and often did God send his messengers and prophets to them seeking their repentance but they mocked them and despised God's warning. As a result, God got tired of their disobedience and sinfulness and allowed their enemies to conquer them. Their enemies destroyed Jerusalem and its temple and sent the best and brightest into exile in Babylon. There they remained for seventy years. God then raised up the Persian king, Cyrus, to free them, lead them back to their homeland, and rebuild their temple. He is after all, a compassionate God.

St. Paul in the second reading also presents us with the image of a compassionate and merciful God. He believes that God is "rich in mercy" because of His great love for us. A love He revealed through His Son, Jesus Christ. As St. John puts it in the gospel reading today, "God so loved the world that he gave us his only Son."

Sin and forgiveness. Disobedience and compassion. This not just the pattern of the Jews of old but, if we are honest, ours as well. Lent is a penitential season, a time when we reflect on our sinfulness and our need for God's forgiveness. There are many ways that we can seek God's forgiveness: by our individual prayers of contrition, by our various acts of contrition during mass, through the sacrament of reconciliation.

How often do you celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation? I probably average six to eight times a year. I confess to the same priest who I have known for forty years. I usually confess the same sins. I am not very creative when it comes to sinning! I confess to the same priest because he knows me well and hence understands the context of my sins. My sins remain mostly the same since my living and working situations have remained the mostly the same for many years. When I retire my sins may change if I move into the priest's retirement home and have to interact with 15 other priests on a daily basis rather than living by myself!

I find it helpful to celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation. It keeps me honest with myself confessing before another human being. Only God can forgive sins and so the priest I confess to forgives my sins in God's name. I see and hear God through the priest. That is what sacraments are all about – encountering God through ones' five senses.

When I leave the sacrament of reconciliation I leave that part of my life behind me... no matter how serious my sins God forgives me. The sacrament encourages me to move on in my life. And guess what? It doesn't cost me anything. It is free!

I am reading a book now about St. John Vianney. He is the patron saint of priests. During his years as a priest in a small village in 19th century France he was noted to be a great confessor. People would come from great distances to confess their sins to him. Many days he was in church hearing confessions for nine or more hours. It is said that he had the gift of knowing what the penitents' sins were before they confessed them! How about you? What are your sins? When was the last time you confessed them in the sacrament of reconciliation?

