

Divine Mercy Sunday
April 7/8, 2018 5 PM/8 AM & 10 AM (This is the 10 AM version)
Fr. Joseph Bambenek
Church of St. Pius X, White Bear Lake

Acts 2:42-47

Psalm 118

1 Peter 1:3-9

John 20:19-31

Sing: "Let there be peace on Earth, and let it begin with me..."

As my 10 year high school reunion was wrapping up I was invited to a post-party, held in one of my classmates' farm machine shed. Not long after I got to the shed, I received another invitation. This one was from one of my classmates with whom I went to school all the way back to 1st grade ... And this was not just any classmate, it was someone who had bullied me almost constantly from 2nd to 8th grade. George, I will call him, invited me to step outside to the field with him for a moment. As you might suspect, George's invitation to go outside alone brought with it a bit of anxiety, but somehow I sensed this was going to be OK, so he and I went out into the field to talk. One we got outside, the situation got quite serious quickly. That is, George became quite serious... as he asked me if there was any way that I could forgive him for how he had treated me growing up. When I responded in the affirmative, his face was filled with peace & joy; it was like a huge load that George had been carrying for well over a decade had been lifted from his shoulders and his heart. It was a beautiful moment; one of those life events I will probably never forget. Although not usually quite as personally relevant, what I witnessed for the first time with George is a sense of relief and unburdening that I am privileged to see as a priest in the confessional. The relief is so often visible when people receive God's forgiveness of sins they have carried around for a long time... sometimes for even 5 or 6 decades. What I experienced in affirming the forgiveness of George offered me a faint glimpse of what we hear elsewhere in the gospel, about the joy in heaven over one repentant sinner.¹

Peace, forgiveness and mercy... those spiritual realities are at the heart of today's Eucharistic celebration as we conclude the special eight days... the Octave... of Easter. Let us begin with what we hear in the gospel passage. Upon His resurrection, the first message that John records Jesus delivering to His Apostles was: "Peace be with you." And He followed it up with a message forgiveness as Jesus sent the Apostles on mission for the forgiveness of sins.

Today we not only hear about peace and forgiveness in the Gospel, we also celebrate Divine Mercy Sunday. This Feast day is one of the newest feasts in the Church. It was instituted by Saint John Paul the Great in the Jubilee Year 2000. He did so at the canonization a Polish nun, Sister Faustina. So important was the highlighting of mercy in his pontificate that in 2011 John Paul was beatified on Divine Mercy Sunday. Three years later, Pope Francis likewise chose to canonize John Paul on Divine Mercy Sunday 2014, an event that a couple of us here present were privileged to witness in person. So why did St. John Paul start this feast? Back in the 1930s, Jesus spoke to St. Faustina over a period of several year. His message to her focused on what He taught when He walked on Earth, in a way relevant to our times: the great mercy that God wants to give to us, if we are but willing to receive it. In recent years, the *Diary of St. Faustina*² has become widely available. And as those who have to endure my funeral homilies know, starting with our musicians Diane and Nancy, at pretty much every funeral I talk about

¹ Luke 15:7

² *Diary: Divine Mercy in My Soul* by Maria Faustina Kowalska ISBN: 978-1596141100

Divine Mercy for a while... because while the importance of forgiveness is a message that speaks to us at every point in our life... the message of mercy and of forgiveness is often particularly relevant as we reflect upon the life and loss of an imperfect person that was very important to us, and as we do so surrounded by some of the people with whom we have been closest over the years... We do this recognizing that the people who we love the most are often the people who we also hurt the most.

St. Faustina's Diary chronicles her encounters with Jesus and His message of mercy. I know a number of people who have experienced deep transformation in their lives by reading the *Diary*. There are several tangible devotions of the message of Divine Mercy in which we can participate. First there is the Divine Mercy Chaplet, in which one uses a rosary, like those hanging from the side of our pews, to say prayers that focus on Jesus' mercy. It is often prayed at 3 PM, the Hour of Mercy, since it was at 3 PM when we believe that Jesus died on the cross. But the Chaplet, like the rosary, can be prayed at any time; and is especially relevant when someone is nearing death.

Another devotion is the Divine Mercy image. Jesus encouraged St. Faustina to have the image made and widely disseminated. We have one of those images in our church, just above the votive candles. Underneath the picture of Jesus, as you can see, are the words "Jesus I trust in you." That phrase, "Jesus I trust in you" is the slogan, one could say, of Divine Mercy, reminding us that Jesus paid the debts for our sins, we just need to turn to Him to receive His mercy. It is the best coupon we could ever redeem.

On the image there are two light rays that come from Jesus' heart, representing the blood and water which flowed from his side when he was pierced with the soldier's lance. There are numerous deeper meanings to these rays of light. One that is probably not discussed much, but will be the focus of the rest of today's homily as it relates to the gospel passage, is that they can represent true freedom and true peace. Freedom from sin and freedom from the chains caused by unforgiveness. Peace as the result of forgiveness. By trusting in Jesus [by allowing Him to appear in our hearts] we have the possibility of true freedom and peace.

Such freedom and peace is badly needed. While Jesus offers us His peace, we must choose to accept it. What I am about to say is certainly not universally true, but often when a person is feeling a lack of peace in his or her heart, and then spreading that lack of peace to those around them through destructive actions... how often can we relate to that?... if we take things down to their root, we will find that it is ultimately due to a lack of forgiveness. This lack of forgiveness can occur in at least four dimensions. [Each one is worthy of a homily in and of itself].

The first dimension is the lack of seeking God's forgiveness, which can leave us, in particular, feeling guilty or ashamed. God does not want us to live bound up in shame. People sometimes talk about walking around with Catholic guilt. I would assert there is no such thing but that is really shame. For when we sin, God gives us the gift of guilt, yes, the gift of guilt, is to help us see what we have done wrong and our need to turn back to God, so that we will quickly say we are sorry, rely upon His mercy and move forward in freedom. But when we don't act upon that guilt, like a cancer, it metastasizes into shame.³ One could give a full homily on

³ For an excellent discussion of shame and its impact that is independently shown apart from the Bible, see the work of academic shame researcher Brenée Brown. For instance, her audio series, "The Power of Vulnerability." ISBN: 978-1604078589

that topic, in fact I think I have. For now, let me just now put in a plug for how to deal with shame. From 2-4 PM today we are having a Divine Mercy Prayer Service. Part of that will include 4 confessors, so you would not just be stuck with me. It is a wonderful opportunity to unburden shame and sin that you have been carrying, for however long you have been carrying it. And when I checked right before Mass, the most recent weather forecast appears that God will be merciful and might spare us snow until after it is over.

The second dimension is the lack of asking forgiveness of those we have hurt. Until we do so, there can be uneasiness. That uneasiness can become great when we are around the person we have harmed because we have not made amends for the debt we owe to them. We can also be uneasy due to fear of revenge. In short, there is lack of peace. But then think of the bully George in my story. Think of the freedom and peace he felt when I affirmed that he was forgiven. Back then, I did not have the power to take away his guilt in the eyes of God, so he hopefully still went to confession about it, but on the human level our interaction of forgiveness allowed for us to be able to move forward, and allowed him to experience freedom.

A third reason for a lack of peace in our lives is our failure to forgive ourselves. Even when we have asked God for forgiveness and received absolution from our sins... even when we have been forgiven by those who we have hurt, there are times when we remain trapped in shame for what we have done. In most every confession session I will have someone will talk about not being able to forgive him or herself. This shame is not of God. Rather it is rooted in pride from the Evil One. When we feel trapped by shame from past forgiven sins, we should turn to God for mercy to help us gain freedom. Sometimes it can be as simple as saying: "Jesus I trust in you. I know you have forgiven me, help me to forgive myself." Sometimes even more prayer is needed. If that is the case, we can discuss it in confession.

And the fourth dimension of a lack of peace in our lives can be our unwillingness to forgive others. Sometimes we are hurt deeply by the sin of another... in fact, I suspect that most everyone here has been hurt deeply in some way. We have perhaps lost something of great value: a dream was destroyed, our heart was broken a career derailed, or a person was taken unjustly from our lives in one way or another. It may seem that with that loss, with what we wanted gone, the only thing we have left to hold on to is our anger over what happened... and our hatred for the person who did it. We therefore hold on to the hatred, bitterness, or anger in the same way that we want to hold on to what we lost. But can that hatred or anger ever give us peace? No. Instead, quite the opposite. They are like a cancer that robs us of our peace; that robs us of our joy; that enchains us to the past hurt, taking away our freedom. That often leads us to ultimately harm others [directly or indirectly].

I bet that more than one of you are thinking to yourself: "Father Joe, there is no way I can forgive the horrible thing that so-in-so did to me." And that may be true. On our own power, forgiveness maybe impossible. Mercy and forgiveness are not natural phenomena, our natural hearts cry out for justice [and revenge]. Mercy and forgiveness are supernatural. For us to show mercy, and to receive mercy, it must in some way come from God. Just as we must turn to Jesus to ask for His mercy to forgive our sins, when we have been deeply hurt, we often must also turn to Jesus to ask for the strength to show mercy to those who harmed us. To turn to Him in prayer daily and be honest about what is on our heart. Perhaps at first it is: "I don't really want to forgive him but I know I need to. Help me and bless him." And with time, amend the prayer as our hearts change. For when we do so, we break the chains in our lives, and we restore to ourselves the power that was taken from us by the one who hurt us. Because until we forgive,

we are chained to that person and that horrible event in our life; they retain power over us. We see, as we look up at Jesus hanging on the cross, that true peace and joy are not won through physical dominance, or revenge, but rather by forgiving those who have hurt us.

My sisters and brothers, Divine Mercy Sunday concludes the special Easter Octave by recognizing in a clear way the mercy that Jesus came to earth, suffered, died and rose to give us because He loves us. Because He loves each one of us, personally. Because He wants to give each one of us peace, personally. Divine Mercy Sunday highlights the peace that is His gift to us when we act with mercy and forgiveness. Peace which brings freedom in our lives... and peace which, in turn, we can give to the lives of all we encounter. If this week we have found ourselves a bit lacking in Easter joy, if we are lacking peace & freedom, let us celebrate this feast day through actions and words of forgiveness, confident that when we do so, we will then receive the peace that Jesus wants to give us and that only He can give us. Let us follow the example of George, let us make a choice today to follow in the footsteps of St. Francis' famous words,

Sing: *"Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me."*