

HOMILY SUNDAY 24-C (Homily 02)  
“Key to Eternal Life: Believe; Repent and Forgive”  
(Exodus 32:7-11, 13-14; Psalm 51; 1 Timothy 1:12-17; Luke 15:1-32)

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Would you like to experience eternal life, here and now?

Believe; Repent and Forgive.

More specifically, the key to eternal life is to believe in God as merciful love; to receive that love through repentance, and then learn to forgive as God forgives. Eternal life will then be ours to enjoy.

Not infrequently at AA Round-Ups, a speaker will share that his or her image of God was a vengeful, punishing, strict and distant spiritual force until they came into Alcoholics Anonymous. There they found a loving Higher Power.

The readings today challenge our image of God. We are invited to believe in God as merciful forgiveness; to experience that loving mercy; to celebrate it and share that faith experience with others.

It is an all too sad reality that many people to this day, grow up with an image of God that they have been taught wrongly about. Today’s readings actually provide us with a spiritual journey into meeting our God who is above all, mercy and forgiveness.

The first reading from Exodus takes us into the mind of the Old Testament peoples, who admittedly were unfaithful to the Covenant almost from the beginning, and quite deserving of God’s wrath. Even after the miraculous deliverance from slavery in Egypt, they were quick to return to the most basic sin of all, idolatry, having false gods in place of the God who liberated them from Egypt.

True to their mentality, God is pictured first of all as angry, vengeful, fuming, complaining to Moses, almost disowning them by claiming they are Moses’ people, not God’s. and above all planning punishment and revenge. All too often, that is the picture of God that still infects people to this day.

Then Moses dialogues with God. He points out that they are God’s people

and all that God had done for them, and then the unthinkable happens – God changes God’s mind, relents, and chooses to forgive the rebellious lot instead. There is a shift in this reading from one harsh image of God to a new softer image of God; a change in belief system. This reading is a glimpse into the heart of God as forgiveness, even in the Old Testament, that sets the stage for today’s Gospel.

In this lengthy Gospel just proclaimed, Jesus, through the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the parable of two sons and a loving father, takes a quantum leap into a new image of God that he came to reveal. God rejoices more over one repentant sinner than ninety-nine who think they have no need to repent. God longs to forgive, to show mercy, to love.

The parable of the loving father dramatically illustrates who God is in response to sin. We are shown a picture of two kinds of sin. The younger son rebelled outwardly and acted out his selfishness, not respecting his parents, his family, his Jewish religion and culture. His was the sin of outward, hurtful actions.

The elder son, on the other hand, rebelled inwardly. His was the sin of false pride, being judgmental, self-righteousness and especially hardness of heart, the refusal to forgive. Surely we can all identify, at one time or other in our lives, with both sons. We have been, and perhaps still are, both the prodigal child and the vengeful, unforgiving child.

The genius of this story is that for both of his sons, the father waits to forgive, wants to forgive. He needs only their return and their repentance. There is more joy in heaven over one repentant sinner than over ninety-nine who think they need no forgiveness.

The younger son comes to his senses, repents and returns, only to find that the Father’s forgiveness and love was there all the time, even before he set out on his youthful sinful, selfish hurtful rebellious journey. He just had to come back to the Father to receive that love and forgiveness. And what a powerful image of God’s love the father is in this story, wanting to forgive, aching for reconciliation, waiting for our repentance, and pouring it lavishly on us when we do repent and return.

The eldest son, however, is different. He is just as sinful, but in a more deceptive, disguised, inner way. His is the problem of painful emotions of

anger and resentment, as well as the defects of character of false pride, self righteousness and the stubborn refusal to forgive. For him too, however, the Father's love is present, pleading for him to let go, to forgive his brother, and to come into the banquet.

There the story ends. We are left wondering if he repents of his more devious sinfulness, receives the Father's forgiveness, forgives his brother and joins the celebration. We are also left with the question – are we also struggling with some of those same emotions and attitudes that prevent us from living in the kingdom with freedom and joy?

In the second reading, St. Paul serves as a perfect example of someone who has shifted his image of God; has come to believe in God as mercy and forgiveness, has experienced that love of God through Jesus Christ, and now longs to share that Good News with the whole world.

Paul uses himself as an example of a repentant sinner. He admits that he was the worst of all sinners, even a blasphemer. However, he was saved by the forgiveness, the grace, the mercy, the love of Jesus Christ. He has come full circle. His faith was in a powerful, distant, almighty omnipotent God for whom he would fight, punish and even kill the followers of Jesus. That faith has now changed to a humble, repentant, profound belief in Jesus as Risen Lord, Son of God, gentle mercy and forgiveness.

Above all, Paul now sees how faith in Jesus Christ actually is the key to experiencing the very life of God, eternal life. Paul is already living in the Kingdom of God through faith in Jesus and the experience of his forgiveness, grace, mercy and love. That is also meant to be our experience.

All we need to do is to be like Paul, and like the prodigal son, to repent of our sinful ways; to believe in Jesus Christ as the love and forgiveness of God in the flesh; to receive and experience that love and forgiveness, and to share it with others.

Another example of someone who has lived the readings of today, who was a lost sheep, who repented like the prodigal son, and learned to forgive like the loving father, is Velma. She was sexually abused by a relative at the age of fourteen. She carried resentment towards him for fourteen years, like the elder son. She acted out with alcohol and sex, like the younger son, even in her marriage, until her own daughter was molested by her abuser's son. She

and her husband moved to another community. Ten years after that, her granddaughter was abused by one of her own sons, the victim's uncle. Then Velma fell apart. The memory of what she went through, all her anger and resentment became too much for her to carry. She sought help from her pastor, who put her through a 12 Step healing process. She received God's forgiveness through Steps 4 & 5 for how she had acted out. Through Steps 6 & 7, she learned to express her hurt towards her abuser with love, following Matthew 18:15. She met with him in the presence of the pastor, read a letter to her abuser, and to the surprise of both, asked him to forgive her for the way she had treated him for over thirty-five years. Then she got up and gave him a hug. She has since then shared a meal at table with him, and even danced with him. Her story at a 12 Step pilgrimage blew away her listeners. This truly is the new way that Jesus brought about, the eternal life he invites us all into.

The Eucharist that we celebrate today is an act of faith in God as love and forgiveness. More, it is an experience of that same love and forgiveness, through Word and Sacrament. We who gather to listen to His Word and receive the Body and Blood of Jesus are forgiven, healed and transformed into his Body, sent out to spread this Good News to the world.

So, if we want to experience eternal life here and now, let us pray for the faith to repent, to experience God's love through forgiveness and healing, and to celebrate that love by sharing it with others.