

***Jesus Reveals the Blindness of Our Hearts
by the Light of His Truth and Power of His Mercy***

Last week in Session #2 of these Lenten talks on forgiveness and healing, I stressed that one of the obstacles in our desire to be forgiven of our sins is our blindness to know our hearts. I quoted just a few of the many passages from the Scriptures that reveal this. The human blindness of heart is dramatically portrayed at the Last Supper when the Apostles and Peter, claimed that they would never abandon Jesus. But within a few hours they all deserted him and fled leaving Jesus alone to be apprehended. And Peter especially boldly claimed he would die with Jesus. But he then denied Jesus three times and only woke up to his blind bravado after the rooster crowed twice. **All this is for our instruction and growth in self-knowledge and humility.** We need to pray to the Lord and ask him to heal our blindness each time we make our daily examine and especially when we prepare to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

We should not become discouraged because of our blindness. Nor should we go probing for past sins and failings on a search by ourselves into the labyrinth of the corridors of our past lives searching with the “flashlight” of our limited vision. We unconsciously do that when we say, **“I am working on it.”** This self-reliant effort is self-defeating introspection that leads to discouragement and often results in self-condemnation. We must always journey into our past lives **with** the Lord Jesus. **He is the Light of the world and the Light of our lives.** He desires to shed light on our sins and failing, **so we can grow in becoming aware of our sins with his grace, express our sorrow to him, ask his forgiveness and healing.** Jesus knows of our blindness, as he knew the blindness of Peter and the Apostles. If we are sincere in our desire **to “face ourselves” in the presence of the Lord,** Jesus will patiently reveal what we prefer not to face about ourselves. But we must continually ask him in our daily examine for his Light to know ourselves as he knows us.

This growth in self-knowledge is also called “humility.” It was painful for the Apostles and for all the saints on their journey to holiness, and so it will be painful for us as well. We must be patient and persistent but with Jesus’ patience and persistence as our Divine Physician. But it will always be pain unto growth and freedom as it was for the Apostles and all the saints. Growing in the awareness and rejecting our human instinct to blame others, to deny our guilt, and to use the other defense mechanism of excusing ourselves is a lifelong journey. Over time these defenses lose their power in our lives, and we grow in being healed of our blindness. The Lord is **“Emmanuel, God with us.”** He desires to

journey with us as he journeyed with the Apostles. May this Lent be experienced as our Way of the Cross with Jesus as he carried his Cross for us and with us going to Jerusalem leading to his Resurrection.

I Know the Lord Forgave Me, but I Cannot Forgive Myself.

If we suffer from not being able to forgive ourselves, often it is not our guilt of past sins that weighs us down, but rather it is our shame of having done such a disgraceful and even disgusting act. This is portrayed dramatically in Chapter 3 of Genesis when Adam and Eve were disobedient and listened to the lie of the Evil Serpent. They became aware that they were naked and experienced guilt and shame. They hid themselves from God. Guilt and shame result from rejection of God's love for us.

These consequences of Adam and Eve's sin still plague every man and woman. At its root this sin is a choice of turning in on the "self," as if we were the center, origin, and cause of our own "self's" existence, independent of God, who alone is the source of our existence.

The word of God proclaims very clearly that I am not an independent entity, a self-fulfilled person, coming into existence by my own effort and determining my life's ultimate destiny by willing it with the power of my own will. Sin is a radical disorder at the core of my human nature that has been deeply wounded by the original disobedience of our first parents who bought into the lie of Satan. But our Creator and Father continually calls us back home to himself. This dramatic pull of human rebellion against God and God's desire and love to draw us to himself is expressed by St. Augustine when he cries out in his Confessions, "***Our hearts were made for you O Lord, and they will be restless until they rest in you.***"

The consequences of this human rebellion are experienced by Adam and Eve as **shame at being naked and hiding from God out of guilt. They were no longer 'at home' in their own bodies** and severed their relationship with God. They experience both guilt and shame which are closely related but distinct. As fire alarms detect smoke and warn of impending destruction, so likewise, guilt and shame are meant to awaken us to realize the destructiveness of disobedience, so that we wake up and repent and return to God. And by his merciful love he will call draw us to return to him as our Father and we as his sons and daughters. What are the dynamics of guilt and shame?

Guilt arises from the sinfulness of my actions. What I do, say, or desire contrary to God's will. My rebellious, self-centered and wounding thoughts, desires and actions are sinful. **The remedy for my guilt is to repent and seek and receive the forgiveness of God.** The Lord reveals repeatedly that he calls me to repent and come to him, to admit my guilt and **receive** his forgiveness. Jesus reveals this in the Parable of the Prodigal Son when the father runs to embrace and kiss his rebellious son who returns to ask forgiveness. Likewise, the risen and glorified Christ Jesus forgives the sins of abandonment and denial of the Apostles by the gift of his ***"Peace be with you."*** as he shows them his glorified wounds in his hands and his side from which flowed his Blood, the source of the forgiveness of their sins.

Shame, however, arises from my false perception of who I am and clings to my person, my identity. Shame is rooted in my denial of the initial blessing of God gifting me to be "who I am" and perceiving myself to be worthless and an hopelessly disgraced in God's eyes, in my own eyes and in the eyes of others. **God's blessing upon me shatters the power of my shame and reawakens me to claim my true dignity in him.** He awakens me to accept again—as his gift to me—his original blessing upon me which he never took back. As Augustine sheds light of my situation when he states, ***"You were with me, Lord, but I was not with you."*** Humbly accepting God's blessing upon me, my true identity, heals shame and restores my freedom as his beloved son or daughter. **Accepting humbly 'who I am' in the Father's blessing upon me in Christ and responding in love and gratitude is the only healing balm for shame.**

Jesus reveals this clearly in the Parable of the Prodigal Son when the Father declares for all to hear, ***"Let us celebrate with a feast, because this son of mine was dead and has come to life again, was lost and has been found"*** (Luke 15:23). In the case of Peter, Jesus had already forgiven him on Easter evening in the Upper Room, but Jesus also desires to heal him of the shame which still lingers in Peter's memory. In John's Gospel chapter 21, the risen Lord appears to several Apostles who have fished all night and caught nothing. Jesus is on the shore blesses them with an abundant catch of fish which reminds them of the miraculous catch when he first called them to be Fishers of Men. On the shore, Christ made a charcoal fire to prepare breakfast for them. Recall however, it was over a charcoal fire that Peter denied Jesus three times. Peter can never see a charcoal fire without being reminded of his shameful denial of Christ over a charcoal fire. Now, over this shame-filled reminder, Jesus asks him three times, ***"Do you love me Peter?"*** And each time Peter professes his love for his Savior, Jesus tells him ***"Feed my lambs; Feed my sheep."*** Jesus and heals Peter of his shame and renews his original call. He concludes by telling Peter, ***"Follow me."*** Peter is now freed from the baggage and

the weight of his past shame and is now united with Christ to fulfill the mission to follow him and to feed his sheep.

It is important to note that people may be oppressed by **false shame** and **false guilt**. Due to past or ongoing demeaning verbal abuse, moral subjugation or oppression, physical or sexual abuse, people may believe lies about themselves and harbor a ‘**false self-identity**’ that holds them in bondage. If a person had been subjected to this kind of abuse as a child, it is like an infection rooted very deeply in that person’s sense of self, now blind that he or she is a child of God, created in his image and redeemed by the Blood of Christ. They have no need for forgiveness of sin because they did not sin. They were victims of others’ sins and sinned against. These children, adolescents, women, and men need our compassion and **deliverance and healing** by the power of God’s love. The deception of the “world, the flesh and the devil” must be brought to light. Often professional Christian counseling over extended period may be needed. If we ourselves have suffered any degree of such abuse, we too need to seek help from those who are spiritually and/or professionally equipped to do so.

*Father Forgive Us Our Trespasses,
As We Forgive Those Who Trespass Against Us.*

I now return to what I said in my previous talk. Yes, Jesus taught us, “**Forgive us our trespasses.**” But that is not the entire petition. Jesus includes, “**As we forgive those who trespass against us.**” Both aspects of Jesus’ petition are essential and cannot be separated. He inextricably binds them together. To ask for forgiveness for our sins and to forgive those who have sinned against us are two sides of the same coin. Up to now I dwelled principally on our need to ask for forgiveness, to stress the need to receive from the Lord what he alone can bestow upon us—his forgiveness and healing. **How important it is to receive first, for we do not have the power to give what we have not first received.** Too often we unconsciously want to act without being empowered to do so. We may hear ourselves say, “**I am impatient, or judgmental or angry, but I’m working on it.**” It is almost our unreflective default button. But even though it is said with good intentions, this stems from a Stoic or perfectionist attitude. Yes, we do come before the Lord in our weakness and sinfulness and ask, “**Lord have mercy.**” **Lord forgive me. Lord give me strength.** We have learned to ask for these gifts but then act neglect to desire to allowing the Lord to give us what we asked for. Take to heart these words of Paul, “**It is God who works in us to will and to act according to his good purpose**” (Philippians 2:13). The Holy Spirit works within us to help us to receive his gifts.

I now address the necessity of forgiving those who have sinned against us. The Lord directly and clearly tells us, that **having received, we must then act by forgiving those who have hurt us.** And this is not easy, in fact at times it will be extremely difficult simply because it is beyond our human power to do so. It is only possible by his Spirit working within us and empowering us by “Christ’s Blood of Forgiveness” flowing within us.

In teaching us to pray Jesus gives us his commandment to forgive others. ***“This is how you are to pray: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread; and forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. and do not subject us to the final test but deliver us from the evil one. If you forgive others their transgressions, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your transgressions”*** (Matthew 6:9-15).

In the Parable of the Unforgiving Sinner, Jesus concludes in these words, ***“His master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you your entire debt because you begged me to. Should you not have had pity on your fellow servant, as I had pity on you?’ Then in anger his master handed him over to the torturers until he should pay back the whole debt. So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives his brother from his heart”*** (Matthew 18:32-35).

And during the last week of his life, Jesus returns to remind his disciples how to pray. He said, ***“Whenever you stand praying, forgive if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father who is in heaven may also forgive you your sins”*** (Mark 11:25-26)

And to further emphasize our need to forgive, we hear these very challenging words of Jesus to Peter, ***“Then Peter came up and said to Jesus, ‘Lord how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times? Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven’”*** (Matthew 18:21-22).

Moreover, by forgiving others Jesus teach us that we will grow to be more like our heavenly Father. ***“Love your enemies, and do good, and lend expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the selfish. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.”*** (Luke 6:32-36).

Paul is faithful in obeying Christ by forgiving others and teaching others to forgive as he encounters situations in his communities where forgiveness is needed. ***“If anyone has caused pain...you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be***

overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So, I beg you to reaffirm your love for him... Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. What I have forgiven...has been for your sake in the presence of Christ, to keep Satan from gaining advantage over us; for we are not ignorant of his designs” (2 Cor 2:5-11) Notice, that Paul reminds them and us that an unforgiving attitude is one of the designs of Satan working within the community of faith.

Moreover, Paul also emphasizes that an unforgiving spirit hinders the power of the Holy Spirit working in our hearts and in our faith community. ***“Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, in whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you”*** (Eph 4:30-32).

These words of Christ and Paul are unequivocal and clear. And if we truly reflect on how challenging they are, we must confess that we all are, to some degree, lacking in our fidelity or even willingness to fully put them into practice. Forgiving those who hurt us deeply is a difficult commandment to obey. In my talk next week, I will draw on helpful resources to offer ways we can come to the Lord in prayer to seek his help in our desire to forgive others as he has forgiven us.