HOMILY FOR THE ELEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – C
June 11, 2016

As I reflected on this week’s gospel, I remembered a story that had been sent to me by a friend awhile back. It was a story that had been circulating around on the Internet. As stories often are that are circulated like this, it is a little over the top in terms of sentimentality. But in a sense it is very much like what we read about in the gospel today, which leads me to say – it could have happened!

The story goes like this: There was an old man named Carl who had lived in the same neighborhood for over fifty years. During that time he had seen the neighborhood change, with ever increasing violence, gangs, and drug activity. In many ways it was like the South Side of Columbus where I was stationed for the past five years before returning to St. Paul’s. And I definitely know people like Carl.

Well, Carl saw in the parish bulletin that volunteers were needed to care for the garden behind the rectory. So Carl signed up to help. One day, as he was just finishing watering the garden, three gang members approached him with menacing looks on their faces. But instead of retreating and showing his disapproval, Carl simply asked if they would like a drink. “Yeah, sure,” the leader of this little gang said with a smirk on his face. Then as Carl offered him the garden hose, the other two grabbed him and threw him down. They stole his watch and his wallet. When people heard of it they told Carl that he should forget about tending that garden. But Carl kept coming back.

A few weeks later, the three young men returned. Again Carl offered them a drink. They wrenched the hose from him and drenched him head to foot, then they moved on laughing their heads off. Carl just watched them go with a sad look on his face. But still Carl kept coming back to tend the garden.

About a month later, while Carl was doing some weeding, he was startled when someone approached him from behind, and he fell. As he was struggling to get up, he turned and saw the one who had been the leader of his assailants reaching down for him. Carl flinched but the young man said, “Don’t worry old man, I’m not gonna hurt you.” And he reached out his hand to Carl and helped him up. Then he handed Carl a bag. And in that bag was all the stuff he and his buddies had taken from him.

With a look of wonderment on his face, Carl asked, “Why are you doing this?” The young man responded, “I ran with that gang and hurt defenseless people like you just because I knew we could do it. It was like some power trip or somethin’.” But each time we did somethin’ to you, it was like you didn’t hold it against us. It was like you still expected us to treat you right, and you even offered us a drink. You didn’t hate us for being hateful to you. And when I thought about that, I couldn’t sleep. I finally realized that your way was better. Thanks for straightening me out.”

Well, not long after that Carl died. And not long after that there was a knock on the rectory door. When the priest answered it, there was the young man. And when the priest looked at him with some obvious discomfort, the young man smiled and said, “I’m here to help with the garden.”

It seems to me that something like this happened to the woman in today’s gospel. Obviously, from the Pharisee’s response, she had been notorious for her sinful behavior. And the Pharisee looked on her with disdain. But the woman wasn’t doing something sinful was she? She was actually performing a great act of kindness for Jesus -- far more than what the Pharisee had done for him. She was acting like a different person from the one the Pharisee had known.

And Jesus knew why. Someone had treated her like Carl had treated that young man. Rather than holding her past sins against her, someone had responded to her kindly, treated her as the good person that
she wanted to be, rather than the sinful person that others had convinced her she would always be. And since the woman had gone out of her way and risked abuse to perform that act of love for Jesus it’s pretty obvious that he was that someone. And that one blessed encounter with him had changed her life. It had enabled her to see that she was not bound by her past sins. It had set her free to move toward becoming the person she wanted to be and was made to be.

Jesus explained to the Pharisee what had happened to this woman in this way: “Her sins have been forgiven, hence she has shown great love.” And to reinforce this blessed movement in her life, Jesus said to her quite directly, “Your sins are forgiven.” And his parting words to her were, “Your faith has saved you. Go in peace.”

Like many of the stories in Luke’s gospel, which highlight the Lord’s great mercy and forgiveness, nowhere does it say that this woman expressed sorrow for her sins, though she no doubt held great sorrow for them in her heart. It seems that the Jesus Luke presents to us is so eager to free people from their sins and set them on the right track that he just can’t wait for their expressions of sorrow for their sins. Before they can even get the words out, he is already telling them that their sins are forgiven. It seems he just can’t wait to free them from those dark thoughts that had been planted in them, telling them over and over again that they are no good and that they never will be. He is so eager to help people see themselves in a new light and to believe that they can move forward in life in a good way.

Now please don’t get me wrong. I’m not saying that confessing our sins is a bad thing. It is often very helpful – and sometimes even necessary -- to get all the bad stuff out in the open, to renounce it, and to hear the words, “You are forgiven.” Sometimes this is necessary and very helpful. But what I am saying is that God is always looking beyond our sin to the good we can be and do. God is always eager to help us move along this way. And I do mean always. Jesus makes this very clear in today’s gospel.

I know that sometimes people will say in confession that they are afraid that they have been presumptuous of God’s mercy and forgiveness. But the truth is that if there is anything we can presume it is God’s mercy and forgiveness. God didn’t create us for evil, but for good. So he is always eager to set us free for good. And he will do this again and again and again until finally we get that living in this kind of love is the best of all things, and that we can do it – with God’s help -- just as that young man did in the opening story.

However, it has been my experience that what many people actually presume is that God can’t possibly forgive them for what they have done. Rather than truly believing that God means it when he says they are forgiven, they choose to hold on to the sense that they are no good, nor can they ever be. Unlike the woman in the gospel, they choose to remain bound by their sins because they presume that their sin is greater than God’s mercy.

I truly believe that this saddens God more than any sin they have committed, and it just isn’t true. No sin of ours is greater than God’s mercy. What Jesus says to us in today’s gospel is this: Receive God’s mercy and forgiveness. Believe that God is really that loving and that good. Embrace the truth that the most joyful thing for God, and the best thing for us, is to leave our sins behind and to move forward in the way of goodness and love, rejoicing in the good news that because God has made us for this, it is something we can do, with God’s help – a help he is always ready and eager to give.

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