HOMILY FOR THE THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT – C

Today is traditionally known as Gaudete Sunday, the Sunday of rejoicing. It came to be identified this way because the Mass on the third Sunday of Advent used to begin with the words we heard today from Paul’s letter to the Philippians, “Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice. The Lord is near.” And this is what our Holy Father wants us to know, celebrate, and proclaim in this Jubilee Year of Mercy – that the Lord who is near to us wants our lives to be joyful, because we are made for joy. And the readings today tell us where this joy is to be found.

One place where joy is to be found is revealed in our reading from Zephaniah, where the prophet says, “Be glad and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! The Lord has removed the judgment against you.” In other words, we can find joy in the mercy and forgiveness of God.

I know that sometimes we wonder if God could possibly forgive us for some terrible thing we have done. But please listen to what Pope Francis has to say about this. He says, “Jesus of Nazareth, by his words, his actions, and his entire person reveals the mercy of God . . . When faced with the gravity of sin, God responds with the fullness of mercy. Mercy will always be greater than any sin, and no one can place limits on the love of God who is ever ready to forgive.”

I believe our Holy Father is right. There is no sin of ours that is greater than God’s mercy. But I think that many of us have trouble accepting this. We have this idea that we have so messed up the life that God has given us that we have moved ourselves beyond the bounds of his mercy. But what our Holy Father wants us to know is that God is bigger than that. God doesn’t spend his time brooding over our sins. Do we really think that when we meet our maker he’s going to say, “Remember that terrible thing you did? I’m having such a hard time getting over it.”? Come on people! No sin of ours is greater than God’s power to do good. Even if we go so far as to take a life -- which is surely a terrible thing -- God has the power to restore it. Compared to God’s power to do good, even the most terrible thing we could do is nothing but a small speck that God would simply brush off his shirt – if he wore one. For he can always restore what we have damaged. And his love for us is greater than our sins.

I had a conversation with a woman once that really helped me to see this. She had a terminal illness. Her son came to see her. During his visit, he became terribly distraught and said, “Mom, I have to confess something to you.” She said, “What is it dear? What’s bothering you so much?” He said, “I’m so sorry about that time when I got so upset with you that I pushed you. I’ve felt terrible about it ever since. Can you ever forgive me for that?”

His mother’s response was, “Of course I forgive you son. But the truth is that I don’t remember what you are talking about.” And she meant it. Now she said this, not because she had a memory problem, but because she had simply put this incident out of her mind. She loved her son. Her love for him was so much greater than this terrible thing he had done, that she had simply put it out of her mind. So when he confessed this sin that he had carried around as a burden for so long, she embraced him, kissed him, told him that she loved him so much, and that she didn’t want him to worry about that any more.

Well God is like this, even more so. For while we may hurt human beings by the terrible things we do, we can’t hurt God. This doesn’t mean that God doesn’t take our sins seriously. But what concerns God about our sins is not that they threaten his happiness and make his life less joyful. What God is concerned about is that our sins threaten our happiness and make our lives less joyful. While it is true that God calls us to repentance and to confession, this isn’t because God wants to punish us and make us
suffer for our sins. Rather, it’s because he wants to free us from our sins. God calls us to repentance and to confession not to increase our burdens, but to take them from us. He loves us and invites us to come to him with our sins so we can receive his forgiveness and move on in a good way. That’s what the sacrament of reconciliation we will be celebrating this evening is all about. And I urge you to come if you haven’t been to confession for a while. Our God is merciful. And knowing this should bring us joy – and experiencing it will bring us even more.

Today’s readings also tell us of another place where joy is to be found – that is, in our being merciful and doing good for others. In the gospel, we found John the Baptist speaking to those who were responding to his call to repentance for the forgiveness of sins. They wanted to know what they should do. Basically what he told them was that they should do good for others – help the poor and downtrodden – reach out to them with kindness, compassion, and justice. In our reading from Philippians, we heard Paul tell the people of that faith community that their kindness should be known to all. And this wasn’t just so outsiders would think well of Christians, but also because doing acts of kindness for others is a pathway to peace and joy. This is why the Holy Father is asking us to engage more fully this year in the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. For our doing good for others not only makes their lives better – it enriches ours in the process.

I’ve seen many examples of this recently. One is the commercial in which a woman is putting a string of lights up over her mantle when she notices her elderly neighbor getting into his car and driving off. Seeing how difficult it was for him just to get into his car, she understood why his house wasn’t decorated for Christmas. And filled with compassion for this man, she did something about it. She took her string of lights and hung it over his doorway. So when the elderly man returned home, he was surprised – joyfully surprised – to see those lights shining there. And as the neighbor who performed this act of kindness, looked out her window and saw the man’s gratitude and joy, she too was filled with joy.

This was echoed in a segment on the news one evening, in which some children were interviewed and asked the question, “If you had a choice, would you rather receive a great Christmas gift or have that gift given to a poor child that otherwise wouldn’t be getting any gifts for Christmas.” And while most of the children had to pause and consider this a bit, it was heartwarming to see each one of them say that they would rather have the gift given to the poor child who otherwise wouldn’t have any. Obviously they knew the joy that comes from giving. We see it also in many of our school children who have raised money or given gifts for the poor at Christmas. They really get excited about this. It makes them happy. I think that at some time most all of us have known the joy which comes from doing an act of kindness for another.

I certainly see this dynamic at work in my own life. To be honest, my own personal tendency is to be like a hermit, to hunker down in some comfortable place all by myself and stay there. But I can honestly say that on those days when I am feeling especially lazy and lifeless in that comfortable place, if I push myself to get out and do something for someone, I always come away from that act of kindness with a smile on my face, a spring in my step and a song in my heart. That’s the way it works.

So if we want to come to a place of joy and peace in life we can do these two things -- turn to God and receive his mercy and forgiveness, and then be an agent of mercy for others. The formula is simple and really not all that hard to carry out. But the results of applying it are wonderful!

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