

## "The Graciousness of God"

Homily of March 28, 2004

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I have been told that this gospel story is missing from some of the early manuscripts of St. John's Gospel, the reason being that some people in the early Church felt that it might possibly be interpreted as Jesus condoning adultery. And there were others who just could not bring themselves to accept the fact that Jesus would be so merciful and that, in this story, he was indicating the extraordinary mercy that God shows to all of us, what the English writer, Graham Greene, described as the "awful strangeness of God's mercy."

There is a story told of a young French soldier in the armies of Napoleon. He deserted in the face of the enemy but he was soon caught, court-martialed, and condemned to death. His mother came to Napoleon to plead for his life. But Napoleon said to her that this crime was so great that the young man did not deserve mercy. And the mother said, "I know that he does not deserve mercy. It would not be mercy if he deserved it."

I think there is a very, very profound truth in that. It would not be mercy if he deserved it. Mercy is a free gift that is given. Mercy does not gloss over the crime. It does not say that the guilty are not really guilty. It does not look for extenuating circumstances. Mercy simply rises above everything, cancels the penalty out of the deep, deep goodness and graciousness of the person who has been robbed.

And that is the point of this gospel story. God forgives. Jesus forgives, totally, completely, holding nothing back and does so freely, not because we say that we are sorry, not because we have done some penance, but simply out of extraordinary graciousness. Now, this is a fact that many people find very hard to accept. They ask, "Am I really forgiven?" There are people who are forever looking back. They are trapped in their past memories. Their spiritual life is smothered by the past. There is no joy in the Lord. They are stuck. There is no spiritual growth.

Jesus said to the woman, "I do not condemn you. You may go. You're free. You're free. You may go; just don't commit this sin again." Do you hear Jesus saying that to you? "You are free. You may go. You're forgiven. Just don't do that sin again." We are, all of us, on a journey to a promised land, an exodus from sin, a pilgrimage of life. And so, we must always push forward. If we ever do look back, it should only be to see how far we have come, to see how great has been the mercy that has been shown to us by a loving and infinitely merciful God.

We have that very sentiment expressed in the reading that we just heard from the prophet Isaiah. "Thus says the Lord who opens a way in the Sea and a path in the mighty waters, 'Remember

not the things of the past. The things of long ago, consider not. See, I am doing something new.” God is doing something new, in us. By the power of His grace, He is lifting us up. He has done something new in the redemption brought us by Jesus Christ, our Savior. That should be our vision. St. Paul said, “The justice I possess is that which comes from faith in Jesus Christ.” We don’t deserve our justice. We don’t deserve our righteousness. It is pure gift from God. So, let us rejoice in it. Rejoice in it. And let us truly believe in the mercy and the love of God for each one of us.

In another place at another time Jesus said, “Be merciful as your heavenly Father is merciful.” That is a huge demand. It is a command. It is not a free choice. And so we ask ourselves today, “Do we show mercy?” Adultery was a capital crime under the law of Moses at the time of Jesus. A death sentence was mandatory, and this woman was plainly guilty. Yet, Jesus showed mercy. And He is saying to us, “Do likewise. Let the one among you who has no sin be the first to cast the stone.” Now, we are not asked to blind ourselves to evil. We are not asked to condone evil. We are not asked to excuse evil. But we are asked to be merciful, and this is very, very difficult. So, we rely not on our own power, but on the extraordinary grace of God that is freely given to us sinners.

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found, was blind, but now I see.