

LENT SUNDAY 04-C* (Homily 02)

“Act and Feel Like God”

(Joshua 5:9, 10-12; Psalm 34; 2 Cor 5:17-21; Lk 15:1-3; 11-32)

Ron Rolheiser, Oblate theologian and spiritual writer, sometimes uses this saying in his presentations: *Act like God, and you get to feel like God.*

Learn to forgive as God forgives, and you will feel God’s peace and joy.

At a Truth and Reconciliation conference in Calgary organized by past Assembly of First Nations National Chief Phil Fontaine, a speaker used the word forgiveness in his presentation. He was accosted after his talk by a rather hostile psychologist who was in the audience. This woman objected emphatically that the speaker should never have used the word forgiveness; that it does not belong in that process, that he was using it only because he was a Christian. The speaker protested that unless people at least move towards forgiveness, they would be angry the rest of their lives. The psychologist retorted that it was all right to be angry as long as it did not control that person. Obviously, this psychologist did not believe in forgiveness, a stance shared by all too many especially professional persons in our day.

The first reading today recounts an Exodus journey completed and the beginning of a new way of life that was commemorated by a Passover Feast. May I suggest that for us, and for our addictive society, this new way of life could be a life of happy, free sobriety, based on the God-given power to forgive.

For its part, the Gospel begins with a complaint by the scribes and Pharisees over the inclusiveness of Jesus ministry based on forgiveness. Jesus then recounts to them that famous story of the Prodigal Son which should be called the Parable of the Loving Father. In that story we are shown an image of a God filled with compassion and love, through the figure of the loving father who forgives his wayward son even before he leaves home, and who waits for him to repent and return.

We are also given two metaphors in this story for our stance toward this overwhelming compassion of God. One is the son who repented and returned to receive his father’s forgiveness. The other is the righteous son

who never strayed, yet was filled with anger, resentment, jealousy and unforgiveness. These are two examples of our own spiritual journey. Which one resembles us? The youngest son sinned, but repented and humbly returned to seek forgiveness. The eldest son, though he never left home, has the most difficult spiritual journey to make, to admit and deal with his own defects of character, the greatest of which is unforgiveness.

St. Paul in the second reading proclaims that we are a new creation in Christ; that all this is gift and grace. We are reconciled with God and forgiven through Christ and now we must come back and be reconciled to God, like the prodigal son. More, we are to be transformed in the process to become the righteousness of God, to be just like God, to forgive as God forgives. This is the nature of this new way of life carved out of the vicissitudes of life for us by Jesus, the Son of God and Son of Man.

Dare we believe this and dare we respond? One person who did in an exemplary manner is Bonita. She was sexually abused by a relative when she was fourteen and ended up marrying her abuser's brother. Though she was able to live in the same community as her abuser, her repressed anger was all too apparent, even though she was very involved with the church. Then her daughter was molested by her abuser's son, her own cousin, when she was thirteen. They moved to Bonita's home community. Years later, Bonita's own son abused that girl's daughter, his own niece. Bonita had him put in a correctional centre for youth, then fell apart as three generations of abuse, including her own unresolved pain, landed on her.

Thankfully, she accepted to go on a 12 Step healing journey and finally was ready to communicate her pain to her abuser with love (Step 6). She cried her way through her letter which was her way of trying to forgive him, then unbelievably, she asked him to forgive her for the way she had treated him for 35 years. In doing this, she was set free from anger and resentment, guilt and fear and shame. She was both the prodigal daughter and the loving parent in the gospel story. This, this is the nature of this new way of life that Jesus came to show us and to give us. Can we follow Bonita's example and share in this new way of life?

The Eucharist that we celebrate now is itself an experience of forgiveness as we are washed clean by God's Word and healed by the reception of the Body and Blood of Jesus. We are also empowered to be like the loving Father, extending God's forgiveness to all those in need of it.

So let us take Ron Rolheiser at his word, learn to forgive as God forgives, and we will get to feel like God, to experience peace and joy in our lives.