

HOMILY – SUNDAY ELEVEN – YEAR C (Homily 02)

“The Longest Journey”

(2 Samuel 12:7-10; 13; Psalm 32; Gal 2:16, 19-21; Luke 7:36-8:3)

You may have heard the saying that the longest journey in life is the distance from the head to the heart. There is much truth in that saying that probably could apply to all of us.

A few years ago William Paul Young wrote a very popular book entitled *The Shack*. In this book the father of a daughter who was brutally murdered, struggles with his anger and sadness. One day he receives a mysterious note inviting him to come alone to the shack where the murder happened. Expecting to somehow confront the murderer, he meets God as Trinity.

Young portrays God the Father as a loving black woman; Jesus as an attractive young man, and the Holy Spirit as a highly energetic young lady. The joyful relationship and loving conversation of this Trinity gradually helps him become aware of his buried destructive anger, and teaches him to forgive his daughter’s murderer. He finds some peace and joy in his life once again.

We all need to make that journey from superficial to genuine faith; from anger to forgiveness; from duty to love.

The same dynamics are at play in today’s Gospel. Simon the Pharisee is dutiful, religious, a leader in his community, but serious, self-righteous, and very judgmental, seeing only the surface appearance of the woman he knows as a sinner.

She, on the other hand, is overwhelmingly grateful to Jesus for his obvious forgiveness of her sinful ways, his compassion, his understanding of her situation and his gentle encouragement to change her ways. It goes without saying that he has already told her, as he did the woman caught in adultery, to “go and sin no more.”

What we see here is her extravagant gesture, her generous response to this experience of the unconditional love of God for her through a personal encounter with Jesus Christ. She knows who she is, a sinful person, and rejoices in who she has become, a forgiven person with a chance at a new life.

According to the New Interpreter's Bible, Jesus revealed Simon's distant hospitality and the woman's sincere affection. Love is the natural response of the forgiven, but the capacity to love is directly related to the ability to receive grace, forgiveness and love. Because Simon thought himself as pious and righteous, he had no idea what it meant to be forgiven and no awareness of his own need for forgiveness, like the elder son in the story of the Prodigal Son. Simon loved little because he had little experience of God's love as forgiveness. Simon, therefore, represents the position furthest from God. Because Simon did not recognize the need for forgiveness, he excluded himself from God's grace.

On the other hand, because the woman knew she was a sinner, she could receive God's grace as forgiveness. Knowing she was a sinner, she could also know what it meant to be forgiven. God's love, through forgiveness, becomes the controlling force in our lives. The gratitude of the forgiven is also the source of new life.

Ultimately, that is what salvation is all about. Such gratitude, however, cannot be forced or faked; it requires absolute, transparent humility before God. In the end, no priest, prophet or rabbi would ever claim the prerogative to forgive. The irony is that Jesus' readiness to forgive the humble and the sinful was one of the clearest evidences that Jesus was more than a prophet. More than any of his miracles or mighty works, Jesus' ability to forgive revealed that he shared the heart and character of God.

For its part, the first reading provides us with the example of David who, when faced with his sin, was able to admit it, repent, and receive God forgiveness, much like the woman in the gospel. The question that we must ask ourselves now is which persons are we like: Simon on the one hand, or David and the repentant woman in the gospel on the other hand.

St. Paul in the second reading simply drives home the same point. We are justified, made holy, by faith in God's forgiveness as the sinners that we are, and not by keeping the Law and thinking that thereby we have made ourselves holy, like Simon.

An incident early in my priesthood helped me move from being Simon, to being more like David or the woman in the Gospel. I had gone jogging one day and stopped by to visit a woman who had wanted to see me. As it happened, a drinking party was in full swing at her house because of her alcoholic husband. Already angry, I noticed a strange lady in the room and was told that she was newly arrived from Montreal Lake and was staying with a man from the community.

That simply fuelled my anger as I judged her to be adding to our problems here when we had enough already. However, on my way out I had to pass by her in the corridor, and made myself stop to talk to her. I learned that she had been in an abusive relationship, had been locked in the trunk of a car, and had come north to escape her situation. My harshness softened as I heard her story, and I agreed to her request to visit me that evening.

She apparently left the party shortly after and went to sober up in the house where she was staying. However, the furnace exploded as she slept, and she died in the fire. I was shaken to the core when I learned that indirectly I was involved in her death. Yet at a deeper level, I took consolation in the heart-to-heart conversation that we had some hours earlier, which hopefully stirred up in her heart feelings of repentance and a desire for a new life for herself. I also learned a priceless lesson for life from that incident which was not to judge others but rather to try to understand them as portrayed by Jesus in the Gospel today.

The Eucharist that we celebrate now is a celebration of God's unconditional love for us through Word and Sacrament, a love that forgives us, heals us and sends us out into the world to be witnesses to God's love with extravagant gestures of our own.

So remember, the longest journey in life is from the head to the heart. We all need to make that journey from superficial to genuine faith; from anger to forgiveness; from duty to love.