

## WE ARE FORGIVEN

On a recent religious talk show a young woman who had just recently come to know Christ was being interviewed. Until her recent conversion, she had lived on the wrong side of the tracks, lived life in the fast lane, and teetered on the brink of destruction. So overwhelming was her sense of forgiveness that this young lady practically gushed with joy as she said, "I can't express the sense of gratitude that I feel that God has changed my life."

The lady conducting the interview knew where she was coming from, for she too had walked on the wild side before coming to Jesus. She said, "I know exactly what you mean. Every day I thank God for saving me!" and then she added a very profound statement: "You know what I've noticed though? People who have always been in the church, people who always do what they ought, who have never really gotten into trouble, don't have the same sense of gratitude that I do. In fact, I've noticed that for most church people, it's not so much what God had done for them, but what they still want God to do!"

If you can identify with that statement, perhaps we can appreciate the story in today's Gospel reading. It's an unusual story, this story of the anointing of Jesus' feet with oil. All four Gospel writers include it in their writing, but only John records it as happening in the house of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell essentially the same story. However, in the first three Gospels, the woman who anoints Jesus' feet is not identified as Mary, but simply identified as "a woman of the city, a sinner." And instead of Judas objecting to the waste of the money for the perfume, a Pharisee was scandalized by a sinful woman touching Jesus. But essentially the story is the same. Jesus sums it up when he concludes, "Therefore I tell you, her sins which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much, but he who is forgiven little, loves little."

Forgiven, that is the theme of today's Gospel reading. That's great news for broken hearts. God's forgiveness can cover us all. Paul knew what it was to struggle with forgiveness and he was not alone. Many a person has felt that way. Martin Luther wrestled with the same difficulty until he came to discover a loving God, a God of forgiveness and love.

We are forgiven. We are made right not by our own efforts, but by One whose death paid the price for our sins. Forgiven! Can you grasp the full meaning of that word? In today's Gospel lesson, Mary did and that's why she offered the perfume in loving service to Jesus. That's why the woman in the other three Gospels anointed Jesus' feet with oil and washed them with her hair. Such was the depth of her gratitude for his gift of forgiveness. Forgiven! Have you felt that power? Mark Twain

once said that everyone is like the moon, we each have a dark side which never shows and no one can see. But God knows the darkness within us. God knows the thoughts, the actions, the unkind words, and the careless deeds that are part of all of our lives. And yet because of what Jesus did on the cross, God accepts us just as we are dark side and all!!!

All our sins, all our transgressions, all our sinful acts and thoughts, are completely drowned in the sea of God's forgiveness. Some Christians pray, forgive us our trespasses. Others say, forgive us our debts. And still others say, forgive us our sins. Whatever the words, the meaning is the same. We come to God in need of forgiveness, forgiveness for what we have done, and the strength to forgive others.

All too many Christians operate with an Old Testament view of God. For them, God is a God of judgment, a God of vengeance and wrath. As far as these Christians are concerned, Jesus need never have come.

Alan Paton, the great South African writer, tells a powerful story which takes place before the end of apartheid. In the story a white police lieutenant falls in love with a black woman. Not only was it against the laws of apartheid in that stern, racist society, but it was an unforgivable offense.

The lieutenant is confronted by his captain and initially denies the charge, but the evidence is so overwhelming that he is forced to confess his transgression. Then the captain does what appears to be a strange thing. He goes to visit the lieutenant's father and reports the situation to him. What happens next is a moving and tragic scene.

The father asks the captain, "Is it true?" and the captain replies, "I fear it is." The father stands unmoving, the silence broken only by his heavy breathing. In the room observing the scene are the father's wife and his sister. He turns to his sister and tells her to bring him the book. She goes to the bookcase, pulls down the heavy family Bible and sets it on the table in front of him. As she puts it on the table, she wonders aloud what passage he is going to read.

But he doesn't read any passage at all. Instead he opens the front of the book where the family names have been recorded for 150 years. He takes out pen and ink and crosses out the name of his son, not once but many times as though to completely obliterate it from the page. Without any anger or despair, without any words, and without any emotion, he does away with his son. Then he turns to the captain and very calmly asks, "Is there anything more?" The captain knows this is his cue to leave and he does, offering to the mother and aunt any help he can give them. But the father turns abruptly and says, "No one in this house will ask for help!" The father still sitting at the table turns

to his sister and says, "Lock the door and bolt it and bring me the key. The door of our house will never be open to our son again." The door is closed forever. The son can never return home.

That is NOT the picture of God that Jesus brings us. Jesus tells us, you are forgiven. You are forgiven and set free. And instead of our names being obliterated from the Book of Life, Jesus writes them with indelible ink! You are forgiven and given a new start in life. That's what the word forgiveness means. The word repent appears 46 times in the Old Testament. Did you know that in 37 of those instances it is God who is said to repent? Repent means more than just being sorry for our sins. For no one can say that God needs to be sorry for his sin. No—repentance means to have a change of mind, a change of attitude, a change of direction. To know that the slate is wiped clean calls for a new start, and that's what God's forgiveness does for us. It offers us a new start.

A new start, knowing that we are forgiven, then gives us the power to offer forgiveness to others. If we know ourselves as sinners made acceptable to God only by the grace of Jesus Christ, how can we possibly refuse to forgive another? It is impossible. George Whitefield was one of the greatest evangelists that ever lived and yet when he saw a condemned man going to the gallows he whispered the famous words, "There but for the grace of God go I." George knew the truth of the words, "We all live by forgiveness." For forgiveness allow us to accept the love that God has for us.

I once read about a bitter man who was sick in body, mind, and soul. He was in the hospital in bad condition, not because his body was infected with some germ or some deadly virus, but because his anger and contempt had poisoned his soul. One day, when he was at his lowest, he said to his nurse, "Won't you give me something to end it all?" Much to the man's surprise, the nurse said, "All right, I will." She went to the nightstand and pulled out the Gideon Bible and began to read, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have eternal life." When she finished she said, "There, if you will believe that, it will end it all. God loves you, forgives you, and accepts you as his child."

Such a simple answer may not work for everyone. But it worked for him. He realized that she had spoken the truth. And over a period of time, he came to believe and accept God's love for him. There is a way to God. Jesus died to provide it. We may not be Mary or that woman of the city, but there are sins that weigh upon our hearts. There are scars and cuts that we have inflicted on others. There is darkness within each of us that no one knows of but God. But that God, our loving God, sees all and forgives all and calls us to him. Remember, the one who is forgiven little loves little. But the one who is forgiven much loves with all the heart! May that be true of all of us. AMEN.