

Homily for the 4th Sunday of Lent

Many of you may have heard about Grand jury Report on the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown that was recently released detailing the horrible abuse of children that had taken place extensively in that Diocese for some time. I could not bring myself to read the details of that report, but I'm sure it's a vivid account of the moral depravity people can sink to without the grace of God. Please join with me in taking a moment of silent prayer now especially for all the victims of this abuse, and for all those who have been wounded in such ways in the name of religion. Let us pray for the victims that they may find healing, that justice may be served, and that God's mercy may cover all. PAUSE.

Justice and mercy. How do these two realities relate to each other? We would probably all agree that those who perpetrated these crimes must be held accountable for their choices and actions, and therefore justice must be served. But mercy – how does mercy fit into such a situation?

Well first of all, I'd like to talk briefly about what justice and mercy really are. When it comes to justice, probably most of us think of civil law – namely, that justice must be served. But justice is not always oriented towards punishment. Essentially, justice is the fundamental requirement to give everyone his or her rightful due. So, for example, in justice spouses ought to treat one another with respect since it is their rightful due in marriage. Also, in justice, employers ought to honor their employees' rights in the workplace, since it's their legitimate due.

When someone is deprived of their due, the virtue of justice is meant to restore what is lacking. Sometimes it's easier to think about what such restitution means in the case of when something is stolen, and in justice it must be returned, or when someone is lied to, and in justice the truth must be told. Other times, though, such as in the case of the crimes mentioned above, what was taken cannot be restored. Therefore, restitution is made in terms of punishment – for example, legally-speaking, prison.

It's a central part of God's Law that justice must be served. Therefore, justice necessarily applies to our relationship with God too. In justice, God must be given His rightful due. In fact, sin is another of saying that we withhold from God what is due Him. And so from the time of original sin on, restitution was rightfully paid by the punishment of the eternal separation of human beings from God. In other words, our sins deserved hell.

If it were to all end here – divine justice – at least from our perspective as human beings – would be quite hopeless and bleak. But while justice is giving someone their rightful due, mercy is not satisfied with the bare minimum – what is merely owed. In other words, mercy is about forgiving a debt that is legitimately owed. If justice gives someone what they truly deserve, mercy gives someone more than they deserve. Just look at our Gospel passage today to understand better the difference – the famous parable of the Prodigal Son. Look at how the two other characters – the father and the older brother – treat the prodigal son.

The older brother speaks from a place of demanding justice. He criticizes his father after his younger brother came home: “I was always with you and never disobeyed you, and yet you never gave me all that you’re now giving him”. You can hear the anger, and hurt, in his voice, because he feels like he’s been deprived of justice. Of course he wasn’t, and the father reminds his son that everything he has has been his all along too. The older son never had to go through the ordeal of eating out of pig troughs or living in destitute poverty.

Mercy, on the other hand, is shown forth by the father. In justice, he could have easily demanded every last penny back that his son owed him. He could have legitimately expected an apology first. But rather, in mercy, he goes out of his way to give his wayward son more than he deserves – he celebrates his return with the finest robe and ring and sandals, and offers a fattened calf for a feast.

The thing is – and this is the moral to Jesus’ parable to the Pharisees and the scribes and to us, who can be so hard of heart – God’s mercy is for all. And God gave us His only-begotten Son to prove it. Whether we have committed the worst of sins imaginably possible or the least offensive sin known to man, we are all still sinners. But, in the person of Jesus Christ, God does not give us what is our due. For in Him, God’s justice and mercy meet, and the price of eternal, exacting justice was paid for by the divine mercy of Jesus’ perfect sacrifice on the cross. In other words, in Jesus, we see that God’s mercy satisfies the rightful demands of His justice.

In Jesus, all our sins were washed away in baptism, and are still washed away in the sacrament of Reconciliation. In these sacraments, the justice that demands payment for our sins and the divine mercy of Jesus' blood meet. We are all in need of God's mercy, because we are all debtors. And therefore, as Christians grappling with things as heinous as those detailed in that Grand Jury report, we can boldly pray, as we did at the beginning of this homily, not only that justice will be served, but for God's mercy to cover all. God bless you.