

PENANCE SERVICE ADVENT 2011 (DECEMBER 11) HOMILY

(Isaiah 61: 1-2a, 10-11 from NAB; Luke 7: 36-50 from NRSV)

CHRIST MAKES FORGIVENESS POSSIBLE

We are all here tonight because we want forgiveness. Christ's Advent makes possible this forgiveness, which his church compassionately ministers in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Here are two stories of forgiveness. One is from one of Fr. Robert Barron's books [*The strangest Way*, NY: Orbis, 2002, p. 110]. It goes like this. An Amish family (father, mother, and teenaged son) were riding along in their horse-drawn buggy. A car came up behind them filled with rowdy and impatient young people. Annoyed at the slow-moving buggy, they honked the horn and waved fists in aggravation. Finally they rushed around the Amish in a swirl of dust. As they passed, one of the young men hurled a stone at the horse – intending just to harass the family. But the stone missed its mark and hit the Amish boy in the head, killing him instantly. Of course, the community was outraged and the young killer came to trial for manslaughter. To everyone's utter amazement, the Amish parents came to the trial and, although still crippled with grief, they actually testified on behalf of the stone-thrower and asked for mercy for him. Despite this more than gracious testimony, the young man was found guilty and sent to prison. Now, every month, the Amish Mom and Dad come to the jail and visit their son's slayer – comforting him, encouraging him, seeking to bring him back eventually into the community. As Fr. Barron comments: "That is forgiveness."

The other story is about a Westerville woman named Rachel Muha who is pretty well known around here. Her son, Brian, was murdered quite a few years ago now. Rachel not only was able to forgive her son's murderers. She also has established a foundation to help kids who might have disadvantaged backgrounds like her son's killers. Her Run the Race Club helps these children to have some light in their lives. Our Women's Club invited Rachel and some of her kids to their Christmas Dinner this past week. It was a heart-warming evening. Rachel speaks out against the Death Penalty as well. She embodies forgiveness.

Of course we also just heard another story about forgiveness in the Gospel from Luke where the woman who was a great sinner ministered to Jesus. The Pharisee who had invited Jesus to dinner is disturbed that the Lord would let this woman touch him. But Jesus explains that her actions were a sign that she had been forgiven many sins and so she is simply expressing her great love in gratitude.

In the Lord's Prayer, we say "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." People like the Amish and Rachel Muha live out this prayer. They teach us what forgiveness truly is. It is not some wimpy "I will forgive but I can't forget." It is not some namby-pamby half-hearted resolution to forgive. The Amish and Rachel Muha radiate pardon from the depths of their hearts. And we are called to do the same tonight as we humbly confess our sins and receive absolution. God's forgiveness is whole-hearted. He holds nothing back. In fact, he delivered himself up in his Son Jesus Christ to take away our sins; and this Christ excused us too in his words from the cross: "Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing" (Luke, 23:34). The Amish parents had the graced insight that that boy did not really want to kill their son. The way of our forgiveness, the crucifixion, was not namby-pamby. And

it all began at Christmas when a special child was born into poverty in a seemingly God-forsaken part of the world.

So I challenge you and me to make this a night when we truly weave forgiveness into the fabric of our lives by God's grace – like the Amish have and like Rachel Muha has. When we receive pardon this evening, let's honor this gift by truly offering the same gift to others. Simon the Pharisee was so uptight and so unable to love because he had not truly felt the power of being forgiven. But the woman had felt this grace. As Paul Tillich said in his sermon on this gospel passage, it is not that she loves and is therefore forgiven; no, she is forgiven and therefore loves. God always takes the initiative. If we really treasure the gift of mercy we will receive tonight, we will be serious about forgiving others. Christ is forgiveness and we are Christ. The Amish teach us this; folks like Rachel Muha teach us this. Like all of Christianity, there is a paradox here. The crucifixion of being a forgiving person is the only road to happiness – here and hereafter.