

## Fifth Sunday of Lent Year "C" – Part 16

We are now on the threshold of Holy Week. Hopefully we are enjoying a fruitful Lent so far. Perhaps some of you are thinking that not much is going on or maybe you are thinking: "have I done enough? Am I making a good Lent?" However you judge the worth of your Lenten experience, Paul has great advice for us in this reading to the Philippians: "This one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind, I strain forward (press on) to what lies ahead." (Philippians 3:13). No matter what has been, for good or for bad, every day is a fresh new start.

Paul's "one" thing was actually two. First, he is inviting us to let go of the mistakes or ways we have failed in life (and Lent). Perhaps you have missed a Sunday Mass, eaten meeting on Friday, have not kept a resolution, or sinned in some way. Forgetting means don't dwell on it.. The second thing has to do with "straining forward." Picture an Olympic runner crossing the tape at the finish line with his arms up, chest out, and is leaning forward.

We have a lot to press on to. Holy Week is around the corner. Easter is just two weeks away. Whether you feel it or not, Lent has been preparing us to enter into these celebrations more intensely. Learn through whatever resistance or doubts you may be facing at this point in Lent. The best is yet to come. Never ever think or say: "This Lent is a train wreck. This year is lost. I will try harder next year." Rather, forget the failures and press on.

This selection from Philippians applies to many of us because its truth applies to our lives: "I consider all as loss and have accepted the loss of all things that I may gain Christ and be found in him." We are surrendering our lives and personal goods to Jesus. This reading helps us to consider our past. We all have sinned, made mistakes, and suffered failures in our lives, and this reading teaches us to let go of our past. This means we should learn from our past sins and failures and don't let them weigh us down with the burden of guilt and shame.

The writer of these inspired words, St. Paul, had a history also. First, he was a murderer. When the deacon Stephen was put to death by stoning, Paul was standing there as a witness consenting to his murder. The Scripture tells us of other famous figures such as Moses and David were also murderers. All of us have a past. Our sins may not be murder, but any sin separates us from God.

In the early Church there was an apostle named Barnabas. His name means "encourager." It was Barnabas who presented Paul to the apostles and testified on Paul's behalf before the infant Church. Yet, later, Paul got into a sharp contention against the man who helped him. They split, Paul going one way and Barnabas another. Paul could not even get along with the one who introduced him to the Church and was known for his positive support.

Paul had his failures in preaching as well. When he came to Athens, he tried to convince them about the resurrection of the dead. The result was "some mocked and others said, 'We'll hear you again some other time about this...'" (Acts 17:32). He learned from his setback. When he next journeyed to Corinth, he said: "I was determined to know (preach) nothing among you except Christ and him crucified." (1 Corinthians 2:2).

What is the point of what we have just read? Paul had a storied past filled with sin, relationship problems, and failures. If anyone could have gotten stuck and dwelt on his failures, it would have been Paul. Remember, Paul was in a lonely prison cell when he penned this letter, and it would have been easy for him to keep rehashing his past sins. But his hope, resilience, and determination shone through: this one thing I do, forgetting the past.

Many times someone who has confessed past sins wonder if God has forgiven them. They are riddled with guilt and have a difficult time of letting go. The solution is – the death of Jesus on the cross. Healing comes from the cross. There is nothing you can do "to make up" for past sins. This realization of our own powerlessness is actually a good place to be. That is when God can go to work in us.

When Jesus suffered and died, he bore our transgressions and took our guilt to himself. On Good Friday, we always read Isaiah, chapter 53: "He was wounded for our transgressions, and bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." (Isaiah 53:5–6).

It is clear from the Scripture, that there is one certain thing about Jesus: He came to save sinners. (1 Timothy 1:15). He did not come for the righteous and perfect. He came for us. Jesus' name itself means Savior. His suffering and death for us should not be meaningless. Do you believe his death on our behalf is meant for our salvation? If you do believe in his passion for us, then lay your burdens down once and for all. You will enjoy freedom, comfort, and inner joy. We are redeemed. Jesus redeemed us.

### A Woman With a Past

The Gospel for this Sunday presents us with a woman caught in the very act of adultery. This story is only found in the Gospel of John. It makes you wonder: "Where was the man who was committing adultery with her? Why wasn't he condemned?" The religious leaders were using her as a tool to try to capture Jesus in a conundrum (a confusing and difficult problem or question). If he let her go, he would be going against the law. If he condemned her, he would be going against his merciful character. How would he handle this quandary?

Jesus, calm and patient as ever, wrote on the ground and gathered his thoughts. (Some commentators say he was writing the sins of those bringing the condemnation.) They thought they had him and persistently questioned him.

In a magnificent statement that once again demonstrated that Jesus is not just another man but as God's own Son, Jesus not only put the spotlight back on them, but he also freed the woman. His answer reminds us of another time when Jesus answered those who sought to trap him: "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." (Mark 12:17). Here, when pressed, his answer, as we all know was: "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her." One by one her accusers all fall away, and Jesus was left alone with the woman. Jesus asks "Has no one condemned you? She answered: "No one, Lord." "Neither do I condemn you, go, and do not sin again." (John 8:7). The compilation of Jesus' teachings should make us marvel and worship him because no human, however learned, under such duress, could devise such an answer. This assertion comes straight from the heart of God himself.

One of the great devotions in Lent is the stations of the cross. The stations recount the way of the cross that Jesus suffered. There are 14 different stations commemorating various hardships and encounters Jesus endured. The center of these are the 11th and 12th stations where Jesus is nailed to the cross and dies for us.

Walking the stations of the cross, especially on Fridays, reminds us to meditate upon the sufferings of Jesus in the Passion. Reflecting on the first station we are amazed at how stoic Jesus stands before the Roman governor Pilate and is condemned to death on a cross. By all accounts, we know Jesus was completely innocent. Yet, he bore the judgment as if he were a murderer, abortionist, child molester, and thief. You do not have to have any theological training to know that he was condemned for us and for our sins and stood in our place. There is a classic saying: "We owed a debt we could not pay. He paid a debt he did not owe."

Romans 8:1 tells us a liberating truth: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." What the elect, candidates, and we, the baptized, need to realize is that, in Jesus, we are proclaimed innocent. Our condemnation became his. His innocence became ours. What a divine exchange!

This truth is demonstrated in the Gospel story. One by one as her accusers all fall away, and Jesus was left alone with the woman. Jesus asked: "Has no one condemned you?" She answered: "No one, Lord." "Neither do I condemn you, go, and do not sin again." (John 8:10–11). The shame of our just condemnation has been removed. Jesus bore the blame himself. Earlier in the Gospel of John we read: "For God sent His Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. The one who believes in him is not condemned." (John 3:17–18). This is another example of the realized eschatology noted in part 14 – for the fifth Sunday of Lent "A". There is therefore now no condemnation for those of us in Jesus. We do not have to beat ourselves up. We are free, as if we had never sinned.

Jesus told the woman: "Go and sin no more." He was telling her to go, to strain forward, and not look backwards. We should learn from our sins and move on. For those who go to reconciliation in the Catholic Church at the conclusion of the confession we hear: "Go in peace." "Go" is the great commission, but in our context, it simply means move forward, press on.

Jesus taught: "No one who puts their hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." (Luke 9:62). In a short three word sermon, Jesus furthered this truth by saying: "Remember Lot's wife." (Luke 17:32). If you recall, Sodom and Gomorrah were about to be destroyed. The angel told Lot and his family to flee and not look back. When Lot's wife heard the sound of the destruction, she looked back and turned into a pillar of salt. Looking back will paralyze us and stop our progression. The readings of this Sunday are all about going, moving, and progressing.

Paul's "one thing" is actually two: Forget what lies behind and strain forward towards what lies ahead. No matter what kind of Lent you have had thus far, today is a new day. Look straight ahead. No matter what kind of past you have had, lean forward. We have all made mistakes and committed sins. There is now no condemnation. There is no reason to stay stuck in the past. Learn from it and press forward. You are forgiven, so let go of the guilt. Go, lean into your future, because the best is yet to come.

Lenten Lessons:

- Keep pressing on
- The past has passed. Don't stay stuck
- Lean into your future: The best is yet to come...
- There is now no condemnation in Jesus

Lenten Action:

- Lay your burdens down at the foot of the cross and leave them there

