

Homily
27th Sunday in Ordinary Time
October 8, 2023

In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth and the earth was without form or shape, with darkness over the abyss and a mighty wind sweeping over the waters, then God said: “Let there be light,” and there was light. God saw that the light was good. God created mankind in his image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. And so it happened. God looked at everything he had made and found it very good. *Gen 1:1-4a, 27, 31a*

These words are taken from Genesis Chapter 1. Sometimes it’s good to go back to the beginning, to look at where everything came from. Sometimes we all, especially I, get bogged down in the pain and struggles and injustices all around us. And then we remember that God made everything, “and found it very good.”

The last verse of Genesis Chapter 2 tells us, “The man and his wife were both naked, yet they felt no shame.” It wasn’t about their nakedness; it was about their innocence. They were childlike in that they depended on God. In their innocence, they walked with and knew God.

Then, in Chapter 3, it all seems to fall apart; “Now the snake was the most cunning of all the wild animals that the LORD God had made. He asked the woman, ‘Did God really say, ‘You shall not eat from any of the trees in the garden?’” *Gen 3:1* ...and the rest is history.

I often get frustrated or angry and ask God why he allows bad things to happen. But I believe there are more important questions to ask: Why do good things happen, why is there any good in the world at all, where did the good come from? I believe we would benefit more from the answers to those questions.

Today's readings paint the picture of a vineyard or garden. Gardens are carefully created to enable plants to be healthy, reach maturity, and bear abundant fruit. God sees us as good; that’s how He made us. He sees each of us as a garden. Just as God supplies the vineyard with the sun, water, soil, the wall to protect it, and the tower to guard it, so also He supplies each one of us with life, talents, family, the Sacraments, faith, knowledge, and the guidance of the Church. There is no good thing that doesn't owe its existence and origin to God. From God, Who is Love, we receive two of the very best things that God gives us; his mercy and his patience, to see the good all around us.

God gives his tenants many chances to do the right thing, to fulfill their duties, to do what they were put there to do. When they don't do what's right, God sends three different messengers, including his own son. In God’s justice, he didn't have to send any. He could have just evicted those evil stewards. But in God’s mercy, He is patient with our sin and our selfishness. He keeps giving us opportunities, many more than we deserve. He never gives up on us, even though sometimes we give up on ourselves. God's boundless mercy is the best evidence of his immense goodness.

Who has seen *The Passion of the Christ*? It's hard to watch but worth the effort. This movie uses brilliant artistic license to illustrate this limitlessness of God's overflowing goodness and mercy.

The film, unlike the Gospels, offers a possible explanation for why the Good Thief, Dysmas, repents while hanging on the cross next to Jesus. Dysmas has been watching Jesus ever since they started carrying their crosses. He is amazed by how patient and silent Jesus is; how Jesus accepts the injustice and brutality.

But only when he hears Jesus forgive his persecutors, does the thief's heart open to God's grace. That heroic, unimaginable act of forgiveness, after all that Jesus had suffered, smashes to bits all his doubts about God's goodness, God's mercy. He realizes that God loves and forgives to the very end, without limits.

And so, at that moment, realizing his own unworthiness, he becomes like an innocent child, naked without shame, dependent on God; he confidently entrusts his eternal soul to Jesus, "Lord, remember me when you come into your Kingdom!" And Jesus accepts this convicted criminal, this notorious sinner.

It's interesting to note that in the film, Jesus actually says the line ("Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do...") twice: once while they are nailing him to the cross and once more from the cross. Mel Gibson was asked why he had Jesus say it twice when the Gospels mention it only once. Gibson answered that he thought Jesus was probably saying it the whole time. God's mercy and goodness are always ready to come into our lives, always - we just have to accept it, receive it, and say yes to God's mercy.

St. Paul experienced this limitlessness of God's goodness and mercy in today's second reading, "the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." I crave for that kind of interior peace. The circumstances of life always tend to be turbulent and stormy, but in our hearts we long for peace and stability. The experience of God's boundless mercy and goodness can give that to us when we finally realize that we don't have to earn God's love; we already have it, in abundance!

Jesus tells us the secret: "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy." If we show mercy to others, our hearts open up, and God's mercy, which He is always showering down upon us, can get in and clean things out, like a refreshing spring rain. But if we don't show mercy to others, it's like we put an umbrella over our hearts and God's transforming mercy just flows away, like water off a duck's back.

Mercy isn't about forgiving others because they deserve to be forgiven. On the contrary, mercy is forgiving especially when they don't deserve it, when they don't even ask for it, because that's how God forgives us. Who has offended us and doesn't deserve to be forgiven? When have we offended and not deserved forgiveness? It's always there from our all-merciful God.

Ask God to give us the grace to forgive others and ourselves, to show mercy and goodness to others and ourselves, so that God's mercy and goodness will finally flow freely, filling us with his "peace that surpasses all understanding."