

Today used to be called, unofficially, Doubting Thomas Sunday and you'd usually hear preaching about faith. But then Pope St. John Paul II renamed this day, calling it Divine Mercy Sunday. That puzzled me. I wondered: what's he thinking? I looked through all the scripture readings for the Mass and I didn't see the word "mercy" anywhere. It took awhile for my "light bulb" to go on, and then I realized this isn't about words – it's about action.

The action's in the Gospel, when the Resurrected Jesus has his first reunion with his apostles – who had abandoned him in his hour of need in the Garden of Gethsemane; who were "no shows" at the low point of his life as he's dying on the cross; who locked themselves in the Upper Room because they were associates of Jesus and feared being discovered by the Romans or Temple police.

Then Jesus comes through their locked doors. Their first reaction isn't joy – it's fear upon fear. They're ashamed of themselves; they had sinned against Jesus; they feared reprisals from him for how they had acted. The last thing they'd expect was mercy after what they'd done. But then Jesus upends their expectations and greets them in Hebrew with *Shalom!* which means more than Peace be with you! It's more like "God bless you with the best of everything!"

Only then does the apostles' fear turn to joy. Jesus extends his divine mercy to them. He forgives them for everything. Then he orders them to spread forgiveness, to forgive sins in his name. This is the beginning of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, Confession.

Jesus gives us this sacrament because he always saw sinners as spiritually sick, and he wanted to leave us a way to be healed, where we experience God's loving mercy. Confession frees us of our guilt, gives us a fresh start. With the guidance of a priest, it also helps us assess our relationship with Christ. Without this kind of checkup on my spiritual health, I'd stay in a rut. These are some of the reasons why I go to Confession once a month.

With a Confessor I can gauge my progress in growing closer to Christ – in my case, it's slow progress, but it's still progress. Confession reinforces I have worth, that God loves me even though I'm a sinner, that I'm forgiven and God is always willing to forgive me; and that helps me bear the hardships in my life. Confession helps me live my faith better, to live by Jesus's teachings and values more. This sacrament has benefits; don't deprive yourselves of it once our churches reopen.

Besides this wonderful gift of Confession, where we can experience God's mercy, another grace comes out of the Resurrection: an increased ability for us to forgive others, to show them mercy, because the Resurrection reminds us this life is not all there is, making it easier to forgive. Father Ronald Rolheiser puts it so well. He wrote:

We have been wounded by lies, betrayals, broken promises, broken relationships. We have been wounded, and we have wounded others. We have been sinned against, and we have sinned against others. We need to be forgiven, and we need to forgive.

That's Jesus's teaching. Mercy is not a one-way street. When we pray the Our Father, we ask God to forgive us our sins, our trespasses, as we forgive those who sin against us. We experience God's mercy in Confession, and Christ commands us to spread around some mercy to others. We are made in God's image. So let's practice what St. Faustina said, the Polish nun who brought us the Divine Mercy devotion. She said, "We resemble God most when we forgive."

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