

## Novena of Grace Day 7 Homily

9 March 2018

Hosea 14:2-10

Mark 12:28-34

Today we come together to our novena of grace, gathering as the body of Christ once again as we have been doing for seven days, to pray with one another, to pray for one another, and to celebrate with a shared joy the many ways that God's love and compassion, God's healing and forgiving touch has passed through the emotionally protective walls and barriers we put up so to protect our brokenness, to protect our vulnerable and fragile selves. God's touch passes through our guarded selves so that we might know more fully, and understand more deeply, on a personal level, how God is constantly and ever so gently working in our lives, particularly with and through our brokenness, letting us know that we are not only loved, but ever so worthy of God's love because we belong to God. And we are, every single one of us, we are precious in God's sight.

On Tuesday, the fourth night of our novena, Sarah daringly confessed that she has never been good at going to confession. When I first heard this, sitting in my chair, I immediately wanted to get up and stand behind her. Not so much as a sign of support, though I hope she knows she will always have my support. No, I wanted to stand behind her because I thought that she was beginning the line of people who were confessing that they weren't great at going to confession, because I wasn't always great at going to confession. I got better at it. I sorta had to. But what made it easier, what made it something I wanted to embrace, was when I began to have a deeper understanding of the sacrament. We all know that reconciliation is a sacrament, we know it is a time to express our sorrow for our sins, and to ask for God's forgiveness. We know this. But what I began to *understand* opened my heart to a greater appreciation of the boundlessness of God's blessings and grace. Years ago, I took a course on confessions while studying theology at the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley, California. In this course, one of the first things they have us do is memorize the reconciliation formula—the prayer that the priest recites asking for God to bless the person who is seeking forgiveness. So, I started reading

it over and over again. But that was all I was doing. I was just reading it...until. Until one day as I was reciting the prayer to myself on a walk through the Berkeley campus, appreciating a warm spring day, the smell of fresh cut grass and eucalyptus in the air, my mind already fixed on a sense of gratitude for God's gifts, I said these lines, "God the Father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of his Son, has reconciled the world to himself, and has sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins. Through this ministry of the Church may God grant you pardon and peace." And I stopped. I was struck with a sense of new insight that touched me to my core. I was sure I must have heard these words before. Pardon and Peace. Smiling to myself, I thought that's it. Pardon and peace. Grace upon grace. It is gift. God's gift. The God who is gift.

Now, I use these words all the time. I say them at the penitential rite when we celebrate mass. I say them often when I lead my students in an Examen or meditative prayer. I say them to myself, sometimes in a moment of fear and anxiety, sometimes in a moment of appreciation for the way God, as Hosea notes, loves us freely and, through an understanding of God's love and gift of peace, wants us to have lives rooted in the soil of God's peace strongly like a Lebanon cedar while blossoming like a tender lily. This new understanding of pardon and peace goes beyond just knowing what these words mean, to a personal, grace-filled moment in which God showed me another way in which God's love is a reality in our world.

If we take a moment, I am sure we all can recall the ways in which we have encountered God through an experience or moment that moved us beyond just knowing what something is, something like love, compassion, forgiveness, mercy or peace. Moving beyond knowing what these are to having a personal understanding of them that has deeply and profoundly forever changed our lives.

When the scribe asks Jesus what is the first of all the commandments, Jesus responds that you shall love God with every bit of your being—heart, soul, mind, and strength. And you shall love your neighbor as yourself. Not just those whom we choose to be with because we are comfortable with them, finding it easy to be around them. But everyone. Everyone who throughout our day, throughout our lives, everyone we come into contact with who is near to us, who reaches out to us in need of help, in need of compassion, in need of having their dignity restored and acknowledged by seeing her or him as we see ourselves. Seeing one another

as a people deserving of our love. Deserving of our care and compassion. Deserving of our respect. Deserving of God's gifts given freely through the hands and mouths that God gave us. Jesus was right. This is the first commandment. And the scribe not only knows this, but he shows he has a deep understanding of the importance of this first commandment because he understands that living a life of loving God and one another is truly greater than all burnt offerings and sacrifices. If we too can see, know, and understand how we are called to love God and one another in our own day-to-day lives, if we can understand the ways in which we can let God work God's pardon and peace through our own abilities to forgive and be forgiven, to love and to be loved, then we won't just be close to the kingdom of God. We will be helping to build it. And though I am sure we know it is not an easy task to help build the kingdom of God, I am also sure we understand just how important the work is.

As we approach the final days of our novena, it might be helpful for us to find some time in our day to reflect on the many graces in our lives, those graces throughout this novena or those graces we remember as consoling encounters with God, to reflect on our graces so to help cultivate a deeper understanding of how God is working in our lives, showing us how to love one another more generously, and how to be bearers of God's pardon and peace.