

HOMILY 4TH SUNDAY OF LENT
March 13/14, 2021

I was listening to an interview with Bryan Stevenson. He is the attorney who wrote the book *Just Mercy* that was made into a movie recently. He is the attorney who worked on getting people freed who were on death row. Some were not guilty of the crime they were convicted of. Some were mentally ill and should be in a mental hospital rather than a prison. Some were children tried as adults and given the death penalty. He said something during the interview that has stuck with me since. He said: “Each of us is more than the worst thing we have done.” He said that we sometimes define people by the worst thing they have done. Rather than looking at someone as a person who has told a lie, they become a liar. Rather than looking at someone as a person who has stolen something, they become a thief. Rather than looking at someone as a person who has killed someone, they become a murderer. He believes we need to leave room for repentance, mercy and redemption. Now certainly people need to be held responsible for their actions; but as soon as we define someone by the worst thing they have ever done, we cut off the possibility of mercy. Think for a moment about the worst thing you have ever done in your life. Would you like to be defined according to that action?

We heard in the Second Reading that God is rich in mercy because of the great love that he has for us. How great is God’s love for us? We heard in the Gospel reading: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life.” We continue to receive God’s unconditional love regardless of what we do, not because we deserve it, but because of God’s mercy. When I think about

having mercy and forgiving someone who has killed another human being, I am kind of taken back by that, but what did Jesus do? When he was dying on the cross, he said: “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” He is asking for mercy for his murders while they are in the process of murdering him. That is pure mercy.

We sometimes have a hard time having mercy on others and forgiving them. And we usually do not have really big things to forgive. Sometimes we only want to forgive someone if they admit total responsibility for the wrongdoing, apologize, promise to never do it again and pay damages. Where is the mercy in that? We have to remember that people are much more than the worst thing they have done. When someone does something to hurt us, it is just paramount in our minds. It is usually people that we love because those are the people that can hurt us the most. We may have a deep emotional reaction to being hurt. We may even define the person that we love by what they did to hurt us. I think we need to remember why we love them right away so that the anger does not grow and fester inside of us. Then we are more likely to show mercy.

One of the things that has led to the polarity we experience in our country is that we sometimes totally define people by the group they belong to. Sometimes this is based upon their appearance or one thing that they say. Then I throw you into a particular group and allow that to totally define you. When I totally define someone by the group that I perceive them to belong to, and if I view that group in a negative light, that person does not stand a chance. No possibility of mercy there. We may want to punish them because of the group that we perceive them to belong to.

One of the things I have learned through this pandemic is that we are all in this together. We have a fabulous world to live in that God created just for us and a very diverse family. Our country is becoming more and more diverse all of the time. Can we learn to live in this fabulous world together? Remember mercy.