

2nd Week of Advent

One of my favorite comfort foods is oatmeal raisin cookies, full of nuts and gluten. When my brother and I were small our family would drive 55mph from southern Oklahoma to Ponca City, by the Kansas border. It literally took 5 hours and it always took it out of my dad. The reward that awaited us was a cold fridge full of Coca Cola and Pepsi, which we never had at home, and a cookie jar on the kitchen counter that mysteriously remained full all week long. Today every time I eat an oatmeal raisin cookie, I'm really eating my emotions, comfort foods. "Comfort foods may be consumed to positively pique emotions, to relieve negative psychological effects or to increase positive feelings."

We are all looking for comfort, we are all looking for something to bring us relief and rest from the demands of life, from the expectations of society that demand that we impress and please, explain or justify yourself. This can make life an uncomfortable and exhausting existence. Which is why the Lord tells us in Isaiah to take comfort, not with comfort foods or self-pleasure, or fame, fortune or addictions, but comfort yourself with Christ.

One of the greatest comforts we can receive from Jesus is forgiveness. There is nothing that you have ever said, noting that you have ever done or anything that you ever thought that God will not forgive, other than my unwillingness to let God forgive me. There is nothing unforgivable in you or about you. There is a catch though, in the fine print it says I have to be sorry for what I've done and want to be different going forward. That's the difference between being forgiven and being bitter or burdened.

We have to want to be forgiven and we have to allow God to change us. The Greek word for this is metanoia. It's a spiritual change within us and it begins with a desire to desire this metanoia. There's a story about a conversation between St. Peter and Satan standing outside the pearly gates of heaven. Satan is complaining about all these sinners that St. Peter is letting into heaven. He tells St. Peter, "I know almost every one of these souls that you are letting into heaven. I know some of the terrible crimes and sins that they committed while on earth and now God is letting them into paradise? That is so unfair and unjust. Why does God let **them** in but refuses to let me back in?" St. Peter looked at Satan and said, because they told God they were sorry. Metanoia takes an act of the will on our part. We have to want to change. Sometimes we have to ask The Holy Spirit to show us what needs changing. Old habits and small acts of disobedience can talk a long time for us to let go.

An exorcist once said, the only sins the devil can see in us are the ones we don't confess. Which is why it's important for us to learn how to recognize the subtleties of sinful habits that can take up residence within us. But God never gives up on us. When the Jews were set free from their long captivity in Egypt they headed straight for the promised land in Israel. A trip that should have taken a few weeks took 40 years. God had to allow two generations of old habits and old thinking to die out before the new, faithful and trusting generation were ready to receive the land flowing with milk and honey. A place of peace and comfort. But they had to let go of old ways to accept and trust in God's way. Learning to let go of our familiar sins and trust in God's comfort can be scary.

In India sometimes monkeys will come and take your laundry drying on the clothes line or grab some food and become a nuisance. So they have to trap the monkey and take him back into the jungle. You would think catching a monkey would be hard but all you have to do is make a hole in a coconut or tree trunk and put inside of the hole the monkey's favorite treat. The monkey will then come and put his hand in the hole and grab his treat but the hole is too small for him to pull his hand out while holding on to his banana. All he has to do to get free, is to let go of the fruit and he can escape but he is so determined to hang on to it that he sacrifices his freedom for a momentary pleasure.

The Israelites, like us, had become comfortable in their slavery. They had to spend a long time in the desert learning how God comforts His people before finally letting go of old habits. Once they came into the promised land where life was good and comfortable once more, they started to become indifferent to their faith and uninterested in God. Struggling and suffering seems to have a purifying way of bringing us closer to God. Of letting go of old habits so we can be free. But we have to acknowledge them first.

Responding to the recent news on Matt Lauer's secret sexual exploits, Franklin Graham pointed out that what you say or do "in private" isn't going to remain private forever. The Bible says, "For there is nothing hidden that will not be disclosed, and nothing concealed that will not be known or brought out into the open." God sees and

knows all. He even knows our thoughts. And He is the only One who can clean up and clean out broken lives, dirty and stained with sin. In her new book, "Loved as I am", Sr. Miriam James says that after living a very active life of dissipation and feeling ashamed and unfulfilled perusing a career in journalism, parties and men, she said she was becoming sick in her secrets. The ups and downs, highs and lows of life in the game of life, were all making her soul sick. She met a priest who helped her admit to herself and to God that she needed a metanoia. Her secrets had made her spirit sick and so when she brought all those things of shame and pride out of the shadows and into the light, she experienced true comfort for the first time in a very long time. Now she is a nun who helps others to be "loved as the great I Am". That's what Isaiah means when he's talking about leveling the mountains and filling the valleys to make a straight road to Jesus. The mountains represent our pride; the valleys represent our depression or despair. The straight road helps us reconnect to God. We can make mountains out of our pride or arrogance, and sometimes we aren't even aware of it, which is why we need to ask God to sometimes show us our pride. And those valleys can be when we feel sorry for yourself or insecure and hopeless, that's when Jesus wants to fill us up with His comfort of courage and confidence.

Both pride and despair weaken our connection with the Lord. For several weeks my phone hasn't been charging well. The connection was too loose and I'd have to hold the cable to the phone. I tried several different charging cables and decided the phone must be faulty and I'd probably have to replace it. On a whim I stopped into the At&t store for their advice, the nice young man pulled out this tiny tool with a little pick on it and he put it in the charging hole and pulled out a big lump of lint. He said now try it, and it works good as new. It wasn't the phone at all. It was me neglecting proper care for the phone. I need to change something to keep that from happening again and when it does, I need to maintain it better. Same is true for our soul.

So how do we do that? How do we metanoia yourself? How do we change and bring our secrets into the light and to reconnect and stay plugged in to Gods comfort?

Penance rite Sunday 5:30. Over a dozen priests are coming. The good thing about a penance rite is that it's convenient for most parishioners to take advantage of this opportunity to be forgiven and receive God's mercy and comfort which we all seem to need more of during the holidays. The other side of a penance rite is that people can fall into a bad habit of only receiving God's grace once or twice a year, when they could do once or twice a month.

Pray for the priests who are coming.

Make a good examination of conscience before making your confession.

Be brief, be blunt and be gone.

Be sure and thank them for coming.