

Forgiveness is something we talk a lot about as Catholics, and rightfully so for so much of our faith centers around it. Last week we celebrated Divine Mercy Sunday, where we reflected on how no sin is too great that it is not forgiven by our Lord's love. And during Holy Week, we thought again of how far God goes to show us how much He loves us. Even just a few moments ago, we said together the penitential rite where we asked God to give us His mercy, and we'll receive it again when we come forth for Communion.

The thing of it is though is love and mercy require a response too. We hopefully learn from our past, but also learn how to become a better person for the future as well.

Jonathan Doll, who earned a PhD as an educator, has helped a lot of people over the years through teaching and counseling. But a big reason is because of the mercy his mom showed him, but also of Jonathan doing some soul searching and realizing he needed to respond to it.

It was the first semester of college, and he'd been away just two months from home. But he'd already been written up several times by the dormitory

resident advisors for partying. He'd been experimenting with several types of dangerous drugs. And then he passed out, high, after a residence hall judicial board meeting, only to wake up the next day in the hospital having a spinal tap. His mom was praying hard on the drive home while they decided on his future.

Jon had never been a hard-core partier or drug user, but all of the freedoms of university life had sent him over the edge. He realizes it was his own fault, but despite that, as he looks back he can clearly see one amazing thing: the ever present, caring image of his mom.

After he had passed out, an even worse thing had happened. He had fallen backward onto an unforgiving marble floor. Not only was he knocked unconscious, but he had two seizures that night.

When he woke up in the hospital after the spinal tap, he looked across the room and saw his mom, with her arms folded, her brow furrowed, and her foot tapping. He felt bad for the mess he had made of things. She asked him about the pot pipe she had found when the staff gave her his clothes, and he said it was someone else's.

The spinal tap showed no risk of paralysis, but weeks later he learned he lost his sense of smell forever from the accident. Also, when he did get the green light to leave the hospital, he was in no condition to return to university life. He was still in a daze when he began that long car ride home with his mom.

His mom was a drug and alcohol counselor and was probably in shock that her own son might be a substance abuser or even an addict. Jon didn't say anything on the drive. He just stared out the window as the miles of highway went by. Then his mom asked him a simple question that changed everything.

"Jonathan were you using drugs? She asked, while knowing full well the ugly truth.

"No" he replied. But lying to her broke his heart. It was the first time he lied to an adult who was so important to him and a leader for him.

Jonathan remembered that lie, and later he dedicated his life to being honest and living the right way. That day, sitting in the front seat of the car next to his mother, was the day when his life began to change. He had been so close to disaster - to a lifestyle of dishonesty, addiction, disgrace and ruin.

His mom nurtured him and he went back to school. The residence director at his dorm gave him a second chance. She allowed him to stay in housing as long as he regularly saw a university counselor.

That counselor helped him to quit using drugs and alcohol, and in fact he became a model student. In his second year he even led a Bible study after a spiritual conversion topped off his first year of college. Then, in his last two years, he preserved and made the dean's list twice.

One day while he was walking across campus, his own process of recovery became crystal clear. He saw two students who were clearly using drugs. His heart went out to them because Jon remembered his own past. Looking into their eyes, he said seven words that would chart the direction

of his future forever. And he only hoped it could help them in their future too.

“There’s no greater high than being straight” he told them. And as those words came out, he realized full well their truth for his own life.

Since then, Jonathan finished college, added a few degrees including a Ph.D., and a fellowship in education. He’s given back wherever he could and counseled addicts and other troubled young people.

The message of life and hope he’s learned from his mom on that long ride home has never left him. As she gave him the room to learn life’s most important lesson, and supported him along the way, he realized the heights to which he could soar.

Thus, he learned he could overcome anything that came his way. It was his mom’s love during his college years that has always stuck with him, and what opened the door toward Jonathan’s destiny.

Love does the same thing for us. Certainly it's sometimes the love of others, but it's always the love of God. The Passion opened up the door for us. Our destiny is sainthood. But like Jonathan learned, we also have to walk through that door too.

Peter gets that chance in the Gospel. We are told that he is going fishing. Not too surprising as it's his trade. But remember this Gospel takes place post-resurrection. Some commentators have speculated maybe he had become a little lax not knowing fully the meaning of the resurrection. Jesus shows up, and Peter, after being told it is the Lord, rushes to see Him. The apostles have a reunion and share a meal, and we can read some Eucharistic overtones into it as it fills them spiritually too. But it's a bit like a meal where something isn't quite right in the family just yet and more needs to be discussed than the weather or quality of the meal. And so Jesus and Peter have a conversation. Jesus asks Peter three times if he loves Him. Peter affirms this three times, and it upsets him but it's related to his three fold denial of Jesus. Peter here is being set right and prepared for his ministry. And as we all know, he'll go on the right path and lay down his life for the Gospel.

What the story of Jonathan, Saint Peter and so many others share in common is that a person can ask for forgiveness and receive it as they do, but one also has to set things right too by striving to become a better person and by living out the faith. The Gospel closes with the same words Jesus said to Peter a few years earlier: "follow me." And He does; Peter is again in the first reading and with the others is boldly speaking the faith despite the threats they are getting and will ultimately lay down their lives.

So how do we follow the road to redemption, embracing mercy, but also embracing a true sense of contrition and trying to become a better person?

A starting point is of course, mercy. Jonathan didn't want to own up to his actions at first; as such he told his mom he wasn't using drugs when of course he was and she likely knew so too. Sometimes the sins we battle we minimize or deny and ignore or justify. But as I've said many times, it's so important to reach out to God because His mercy is always there. He did not shame Peter at all. He simply offered him peace. And sometimes we go to confession or see the improvements during Lent and fall back into a bad habit, perhaps like Peter might have in the Gospel. It's again worth

remembering God's love is always there and He forgives 70 times 7, so we again return to confession and to Mass to be forgiven.

But the thing of it is, hopefully we take the next step and try to learn from our mistakes. Presumption is a sin, meaning if we just constantly do something we shouldn't and say "I'm sorry" thinking mercy is always there but requires no intent to want to become a better person. When we say the Act of Contrition, we frequently say we will strive to avoid the near occasion of sin. So that means we look at what is it that causes us to maybe be more prone to sin, and what can we do to fix it or to act differently? For instance without violating the seal of the confessional it probably won't shock you that with children who have siblings, sometimes there can be dust ups causing mom to have to get to be involved. Something I might say is maybe go to your room and hit a pillow or out in the yard and take a few deep breaths before escalating a fight with your brother. Or maybe fatigue causes a person to become more cranky with their spouse or kids and they can get better sleep. Or stress causes abuse of alcohol or self-abuse of the body or looking at bad things on a computer. The point is we may very well sin again, but we want to work for progress. We look back on where we have been and try to avoid that situation.

Lastly, restitution is also important. Jonathan recognized what he did, and then set out to help people. Peter followed Jesus and became a fisher of men. When we sin, we should try to not only avoid sin, but set things right. Jonathan knew he let his mom down and he loved her, so his change was also a response to his mom continuing to believe in him and support him. If we've let someone down, we should strive to set things right. We apologize but must mean it. We take steps to change. So maybe a child who socked their brother not only doesn't try to not fight but works on playing with them; or a spouse who used hurtful language does an act of charity for their spouse; or a person who's avoided Mass starts going and maybe even decides to become a lector or catechist. That is how we follow Jesus; we follow Him by making ourselves better, but also like Jonathan did, in making other people better too through actions of love.

In just a few moments we'll come forward and welcome Jesus into our hearts, and in so doing we'll also be receiving love and mercy. Let's make sure this isn't just something mechanical but something that is just as special as the day we made our first communion. For in receiving Jesus, like Peter we are saying we love Him and that we want to follow Him.

Sometimes we will stray, but he will always be there to show us the right way. On our part, let's do what we can to stay on the path and help others to find it to by extending God's love to all the world.

****For the First Communion Masses I shared a book, called "Sorry" by Trudy Ludwig written for kids stressing the point that "sorry" needs to be backed up with contrition and restitution and we have to mean it. ****