

Ever since the beginning, we as humans have had a hard time owning up to the reality of sin and our own actions. Remember the story of Adam and Eve; the serpent tricked me; the woman you put here she gave it to me. And while there is a consequence for the sins of human beings, there is also a response - a response given by Jesus seen many times to the sinner, namely that of love, and mercy and forgiveness. On our part, the question is how do we seek it out, but how do we learn from our mistakes and move forward?

In a short story she writes called “The Choice to Come Clean,” a writer named E. Mifflin shares the story of how she came to make that choice and learned from her mistake. It was one of those sins that wasn’t really intentional, but also one she could have chose to just ignore or wish away, but instead opted to confront.

One day she was looking at her computer screen, and she re-read the message from her friend, Noelle. Someone had upset her by sharing her personal news, a recent development Noelle had only shared with a few people. She did not know who let the word out, but she was sad and hurt and disappointed.

Mifflin felt guilty. She knew how the news had gotten out because she had been the one to tell someone beyond Noelle’s immediate circle. Honestly, she hadn’t

realized she meant to keep it so close to home, but at the same time she knows it wasn't a good idea when she started to tell someone else; she'd forged ahead anyway.

Did Noelle really not know that it was her, she wondered to herself. It would have been easy to come clean and apologize if her not was an accusation. But it read as though it had been copied and pasted to several people. once again, ignoring the right option, she chose the coward's way out.

"I'm so sorry that happened to you," she typed. "How awful that your confidence was broken."

She hoped that would do. Her reply came back within seconds. "Thank you."

Surely, she thought, that would be good enough. She didn't own up to her actions, but she'd expressed remorse and sympathized with her pain. And, really, that's what he would have done if she had confessed. It would be okay for her to remain anonymous as long as she was sorry, wouldn't it?

But, deep down, she knew she had been the one to break faith and hurt her. She was ashamed, not only of her original action, but because she had heaped wrong upon wrong by covering it up.

She felt miserable at church on Sunday. She even abstained from communion, and watched others partake while she sat in silence was a painful experience, one she hoped to never repeat.

Later, the speaker challenged the people to risk everything to find God's best. He asked the people to examine themselves and see if anything stood in the way of their relationship with God, and if so, to not let anything stop them until it was cleared away. Chancing it all - whatever they feared, whatever held them back, would be worth it to be right with God.

She knew what stood between her and doing the right thing: her reputation. That's what she feared losing in telling Noelle the truth. Of course, Noelle would be let down in her, but deep down, she dreaded the possibility that she might tell others. It would be within her rights to do so, but she also told herself what was her reputation compared to doing the right thing? To remain silent would make that

reputation a lie anyway. Was she really willing to risk it, as the speaker had phrased it, in order to receive the forgiveness she needed?

She went straight to Noelle after the service. She first confessed her sin of gossip and then how she had chosen not to come forward when she had the chance. She felt relief already, and then Noelle showed grace and forgave her. She explained why her actions had been so painful, and now she won't soon forget the reminder to listen more closely to her conscience when speaking of others. They parted that day on good terms and remained friends. She never heard if Noelle relayed her wrongdoing to anyone else, but she says even if she did, she knows telling the truth and asking for forgiveness set her heart free.

As Saint Paul says in our second reading, now is the acceptable time; you and I are an ambassador for Christ. Now is the time to return to the Lord as we hear in that first reading, with our "whole" heart we are told. The problem is sometimes we have a hard time going all the way. This special season gives us the chance to truly set things right in the proper way.

The starting point is not being afraid, but remembering the words of the prophet Joel, "gracious and merciful he is, slow to anger, rich in kindness and relenting in

punishment.” In a way, that’s what the two friends experienced when one owned up to not keeping her friend’s confidence. Now were I her priest and she came to me for spiritual counsel, I would not say she did anything seriously sinful where she should not go to communion. Rather she committed a venial sin, and was a bit insensitive. But she also takes the first step, realizing that she made a mistake and trusting that both God but also her friend would forgive. And what a beautiful experience when she experienced that mercy. We receive that when we pray; when we come to confession; when we approach the altar a second time after being reminded that we are dying and will return to dust, to receive a foretaste of heaven in the Body of Christ. So no matter what we battle, may we start by knowing God’s love is there.

The mercy is there, but what we also are reminded of too is that sin has a cost, and we look at it head on. There is no Easter without Good Friday. When Jesus appears to his friends after the resurrection, He says peace, but there is also the reality of the wounds on His body. We try to cover these things up and sometimes pretend they are not there. So how might we use this season to look at what needs to change. In the story, she had the fortitude to own up to what was wrong, and learned from that experience to emerge a better person. We can be so dismissive of sin; we can say it’s not a big deal, no one will know, it’s just part of who I am. But

all of us through our sins, to borrow from Fr. Barry in “On the Waterfront,” are as culpable as the soldiers who drove the nails into our Lord’s hands and feet. Jesus confronts that by dying for us out of love; but we confront it through owning up to it. So what is it in our lives that we need to confront? What is it we are letting go? A healthy conscience has us think “outside the box” too a bit. Perhaps it is struggles with the flesh; maybe it’s gossip; maybe it’s issues in the family, like not doing our fair share around the house; being too controlling as a parent or too lenient and not wanting confrontation and struggling with cowardice; perhaps it’s envy in our heart; or wrath and anger towards people in our lives or those with whom we disagree with politically or on other matters; or perhaps its keeping God at a distance and our prayer life has become non-existent. All of us have sin, but we don’t want to think about it. Well now is the time to think about it. To bring it to God, and to ask for mercy, but to name it and lay the cards on the table.

As we do that, the season invites us to formulate an action plan. That includes prayer and being close to God so we have strength for battle. But the action plan can also include what to do in times of temptation; that might include something as simple as leaving a room when we’re angry, or turning off our computer late at night when were tempted to look at things we shouldn’t look at or get rolling on social media to vent our frustrations at other people. Maybe it means making an

effort to be more involved in our families lives, or do things with a better attitude. This can also include fasting from things during Lent; not so much food but maybe we put away the video game and focus on working ahead on homework; maybe we turn off the cell phone and spend time actually conversing with people at the dinner table or our family; maybe we take some money that would have gone to entertainment and give it to the poor; or put the breaks on shopping and online spending if it's become too expensive. But remember, while these practices are helpful in having us confront what it is we want to overcome, temptation as we'll hear about in this upcoming weekend's Gospel doesn't go away, but we can use this season to not just be aware of the sins in our lives but know how to confront them with our Lord.

And lastly, how do we, like E. Mifflin in the story and her friend Noelle, emerge changed for the better? The goal of Lent is not to go without girl scout cookies and then devour a box on Easter Sunday. What's the point of that? Rather the goal of Lent is to say God has formed me more, and has changed me; I'm now wiser because I see more things in my life that needed changing. Maybe through the season, you now are better because you don't procrastinate as much on homework or household chores; you're not harboring as much resentment towards someone; you're more involved in the lives of your loved ones; your a less angry person; or

you have a more cheerful heart. The season is there to help mold us into the people we want to become, not to revert to the people we were.

Saint Augustine once said, on chastity, which was a battle for him “Yes Lord, but not yet.” Like him, we can live in a sort of denial as if life is eternal. But Augustine learned how to control his passions, and that’s why he is a saint. Ash Wednesday allows us to enter into a season to grow up; to no longer think as a child but to think as an adult; to open ourselves up to grace.

The ashes remind us of death, but again, later at Mass we approach the altar again and are given a taste of eternity in Holy Communion. We receive Jesus, we choose to follow Him, so may this holy season help us to become more like Him and grow closer to Him. Sin is ugly; the cross is the reality of it. But the cross is also the reality of love, so let us choose love today because we do not know how many tomorrows we have left, but when we choose Christ now we choose life in abundance.