

In a Peanuts cartoon Lucy is chasing Charlie Brown. She is shaking her fist at him and screaming:

"I'll get you, Charlie Brown. I'll get you. And when I get you, I'm going to knock your block off!"

Suddenly, Charlie Brown screeches to a halt. He turns and in a very mature way says:

"Wait a minute, Lucy. You and I are relatively small children with relatively small problems and if we can't sit down and talk through our problems with love, respect and understanding, how can we expect the great nations of the world to sit down and talk things through?" And then, "Pow!" Lucy slugs him and says: *"I had to hit him quick, he was beginning to make sense!!!"*

It seems that Lucy wisely understood the power of forgiveness and reconciliation but she was afraid it might change her ways and she didn't really want to risk that. Being forgiven has the power to make us a different person but we hesitate to believe it possible.

"Father, what I did was horrible. I am so ashamed. I don't know if God will forgive me." So many times people have said this or something like this to me. In all cases, the people have not forgiven themselves; so they think that God will not forgive them.

I'm going to tell you two stories of high school kids who behaved terribly and who thought that they could not be forgiven. Sadly, the basic facts of each story are true.

The first is about **Shirley**. Shirley did her best to destroy Cynthia. At their high school, homecoming court was reserved for seniors and Shirley had her eye on it ever since she was a freshman.

More than that, she was determined to be the queen. She was pretty well convinced that she would get there.

And then junior year started and **Cynthia** showed up, transferred in from another school. Cynthia was beautiful and smart. She was popular. The boys, the other girls, and even the teachers talked about Cynthia like she was the greatest person ever. Shirley had to find a way to eliminate Cynthia from the competition. Shirley hatched her plot. She made up stories about Cynthia. She got some of the boys to tell lies about her. She hinted to the teacher who was the class moderator that Cynthia transferred to the school to escape her reputation. She got others to bully Cynthia on the internet. It all becomes too much for Cynthia. Instead of telling her parents or anyone, she tried to hurt herself. Thank God her mother found her and called 911. Cynthia went to the hospital and then to a psychiatric facility. Soon, word got out that someone was trying to destroy her. Shirley knew that she was that someone. She didn't think it would all go that far. But it did. Now, if Cynthia never recovers or is scarred for life, it is Shirley's fault. "I don't know if God will forgive me," Shirley says.

"He will," today's Gospel tells us. Just as he forgave the woman caught in adultery, caught doing something that would normally have led to her begin stoned to death; so also God will forgive Shirley. He will tell her to get up and stop sinning like this, stop hurting people. Shirley now has to forgive herself for being so mean, cruel and sinful. She can; love and forgiveness give us the power to change.

The second story is about **Fred**. Fred was even worse than Shirley. Fred was responsible for taking a life. Here's what happened. Fred got Lois pregnant and it wasn't a mistake. He did it to get back at her girlfriend Clare whom he had dated and who had dumped him a few months earlier. Fred told Clare that he wanted to take their relationship to "the next level." You know what he wanted. Clare said, "No way." When Fred kept pushing her and even started getting physical, she gave him the old heave-ho. That's when Fred decided to use Clare's best friend to get back at her. He started going with Lois, lied to her about his eternal love, and wore her down until their relationship became sinful. He wanted Lois to get pregnant because he knew she would tell Clare. Fred was so pleased with himself. **After** that bit of perverted fun, Fred had to deal with Lois' concern about the baby. "*No big deal,*" he said to her. "*A lot of girls have abortions. I'll take you and pay for it.*" And he did. Then Lois became depressed. Clare hated him more than ever. **But more than all that**, Fred kept thinking about the baby. What has he done? He used Lois for vengeance, had sex with her numerous times to get her pregnant, and then had the child, his child, killed. "*What I have done is beyond evil,*" Fred said. He was right. "*I don't know if God can forgive me.*" Here he was wrong. He can, and He will and when Fred accepts that he is going to radically change his life, stop using people, particularly girls, and start fighting for life.

These are two extreme cases of high school sinners who were forgiven. In both cases they might have legal ramifications, criminal charges, they would have to answer

but they were still forgiven by the Lord. I don't know if there are any Freds or Shirleys among us but everyone here, myself included, has sinned in ways that we are ashamed. And all of us wonder with Shirley and Fred, "*Will God forgive me?*" He forgave the woman who the law said should be killed for her sin. He will forgive Shirleys and Freds if they are truly sorry and determined to change their lives. He will forgive you and me if we are willing to risk becoming the people God knows we can be.

All of us, to some degree or other, have negative images of ourselves. There are things we don't like about ourselves. There are days when we don't understand how someone else can love us. We have heard parents, teachers, priests and others tell us that we have to fight against the negative feelings we have about ourselves if we are ever going to be sane, mature people. This is all true.

Still, we are not Mr. or Mrs. Perfect and never will be. There is a hint of truth in the negativity we see. But God loves you and me for whom we are, with our blemishes. And He demands that we love ourselves, not with the conceited love that says, "I am so wonderful," but with the love that says, "I am who God created me to be, with tremendous talents in some areas and less talent in other areas."

When we realize that we have behaved in a sinful way, it is normal for the negative view of ourselves to start dominating our thoughts. But it can lead to a vicious circle where we become so overwhelmed by this view, that we give up on ourselves. We do all sorts of horrible things because we figure, "I am not good, so why try?"

Let's take another look at that woman at Jesus' feet. She was sinful. She should have been killed for her sins, at least according to the law of her time. That probably wasn't the first time she committed adultery. It was most likely just the first time she was caught. She also probably said, "*I am not good, so why try to be good?*" Why try? Try because Jesus sees good in you. He loves you and is picking you up and telling you that he will not hold your sins against you. Now, go change your life and stop sinning like that.

Why try, all you Shirleys and Freds? Try because Jesus sees good in you and loves you. Go to confession; be assured of his reconciling love. Then know that Jesus forgives you and will not hold your horrible sins against you. You aren't perfect but there is good in you that can grow and transform you.

Sometimes preachers when looking at the passage before us today put heavy emphasis on the words of Jesus, 'Go and sin no more.' I don't think we need to do this because if the sinner experiences a true expression of love then they will not be inclined to sin again. Love builds up a person, love edifies them; the experience of love heals them and makes them better.

This is Penance Service Week all around our area, ours is on Thursday. Let God forgive you, help you forgive yourself and bring a refreshing healing into your life.