

Second Sunday of Easter 2020  
*Divine Mercy Sunday*

[Acts 2: 42-47; Psalm 118; 1Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31]

For over a month now, we have been living with restrictions placed upon our freedom of movement. These constraints have been imposed upon us by civic authorities to protect us against the spread of the coronavirus. We understand their necessity, and so, as a population, have been generally compliant. In news reports of late, however, we are hearing a growing number of voices asking when the restrictions will be lifted. So, medical experts are strongly encouraging us to be patient, to stay the course, because failure to do so would risk losing all the advances we have made against this disease.

Today's texts from Sacred Scripture invite us to ponder a restriction that impacts and limits us in another sense, that is, in the context of our life of faith. This is one not imposed by others but that we place upon ourselves. Though retaining medical restrictions is good for our physical health, holding on to this spiritual shackle is detrimental to the wellbeing of our souls.

I'm speaking of the restriction called doubt. Ours is a life of faith; doubt constrains belief. Just how debilitating doubt becomes clear when we reflect upon the fundamental role faith plays in our lives.

Faith is the response we give to the Easter proclamation. The Resurrection of Jesus from the dead is God's decisive victory over sin and death. It is God's lifting, if you will, of the restriction humanity had placed upon itself by turning away from Him. This removal sets us free to live as God's adopted children. The way to participate in this victory and share in the liberty that Christ has gained for us, is through faith in him. St. John is clear about this, when, at the end of this morning's passage from his Gospel, he says that everything he has written about Jesus, especially his death and resurrection, is so that we might believe, and in believing have life.

That same passage from St. John identifies doubt as a powerful restriction on this faith. In the narrative, we have the famous encounter between Jesus and Thomas, who doubted the fact of the Resurrection. The doubt we experience as believers, however, is different than this. We do believe, of course, that Jesus is risen and with us. We are a baptized people, after all, described beautifully by St. Peter as the community of faith that, even without seeing Jesus, loves him and believes in him. Yet even in such believing hearts, there can arise doubt, not about his Resurrection but his love and mercy. This particular restriction on our faith is itself the result of a myriad of other restrictions we place upon ourselves or on others.

Here is what I mean. In our day, human worth and dignity are increasingly perceived as conditional. Unless I am successful in worldly terms, or have beauty or talent, or am assessed as being in some way useful to society, then I am not considered worthy even of another's attention. In such a context I might well end up doubting that the Lord himself even notices, let alone loves me. Everyone needs to know that they are unconditionally loved, but the restrictions others might place upon that love can lead to a limitation I put upon my own belief in God's love for me.

So, too, with respect to God's mercy. Sin is alien to none of us. When, for example, we compare our lives with that of the first Christians described in the passage from *Acts*, we realize very quickly that we have not always held to the apostolic teaching but instead have preferred to place restrictions on what doctrines of the Church I will follow; we see that limits we place on our time leave no room for the reading of Sacred Scripture or the celebration of the sacraments; or we have to admit we have placed undue boundaries upon our charity toward those in need. At times our iniquity has attained grave proportions, and we doubt if we would – or even could – ever be forgiven. Here we are actually presuming to place a restriction upon God Himself; we assume that there is a limit to his mercy towards us sinners.

Jesus earnestly wants to lift this restriction of doubt. For Thomas, the doubt residing in his heart disappeared when he touched the wounds of Jesus. For our doubt to be dispelled, we need Jesus to touch ours. Our sins, and life itself, can leave us very deeply wounded and hence doubting. When the Lord touches our wounds and heals them by his mercy, we know for ourselves the truth of his unconditional love, and the restriction of doubt is lifted.

So, we need that healing touch of Jesus. But that begs the question: how does it come to us? Yet again, we can turn to our Gospel passage for the answer. What we find there, however, can, in our present circumstances, startle us. We see that the healing touch of the Lord reaches us when he does to us what we really don't want anyone to do to us right now; when he breathes on us. These days we are terrified of the very idea. Breath has become potentially very dangerous, as it might carry with it droplets that transmit the virus. Obviously, the breath of Jesus is of an entirely different order. It is, in fact, the Holy Spirit. We are told by St. John that Jesus breathed on the Apostles and gave them the Holy Spirit by whose power they could bind and loose sin in his name. From that event we know that the breath of the Lord, his merciful touch, reaches and forgives us in the sacrament of Penance. This breath carries no sickness, but only healing. What it bears is divine mercy, which wills in no way to be constrained. God's love seeks out everyone, without restriction. Let that never be doubted!

This is Divine Mercy Sunday, a day when the self-imposed restriction we call doubt should vanish before the wonder of God's unconditional love and all-encompassing mercy. This truth of the divine love and mercy breaks upon us today anew in the celebration of the Eucharist, where Jesus, our Crucified Lord, is present in the full power of his Risen life. In these days of livestreamed mass, we can trust that Jesus, present here on this altar, will ensure that his sacramental grace reach us even within the confines of our homes, just as he found the Apostles behind their own closed doors. Divine Mercy Sunday is a wonderful occasion to open our hearts fully to Jesus, our Merciful Saviour, as he comes to us. Let us without fear express to him our doubts and anxieties. May the breath of his divine mercy touch the wounds of our sins and failings, and lift the restriction of doubt, so that we might cry out once again, with St. Thomas and in full Easter faith, that Jesus Christ, Crucified and Risen, is indeed Our Lord and our God.

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