

11th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – C (June 13, 2010)
Fr. Jerry Kopacek

Everybody loves a juicy scandal, right? At least it seems that way: every time another politician or sports or Hollywood celebrity gets caught misbehaving in any way, we can't get enough of the details from the cable news shows, the websites, the magazines at the grocery store checkouts, or even page two of the Waterloo-Cedar Falls Courier... Well, imagine this scenario: a powerful world leader seemingly has it all—wealth, power, and everything that goes along with it. He sees a beautiful woman who he wants for himself despite the fact that she is married to one of his own military commanders. He nevertheless takes this woman and commits the sin of adultery. And if that wasn't enough, he then arranges to have her husband (his own commander) killed in battle so that he can take his widow for his own wife.

A major scandal to be sure—imagine what the media could do with a story like this. We might call this a scandal of biblical proportions, because it truly and it truly happened. Welcome to the Old Testament life and times of King David! Our first reading today summarizes the story, and a pathetic story it was. David, the most famous king in all the Old Testament and the one who in many ways tried to serve God as well, was not immune from temptation and sin. He lusted after the wife of Uriah, one of his loyal warriors—and after taking her for himself, arranged to have Uriah placed in the front lines of battle where he was killed. Adultery, murder, betrayal and treachery—this is surely the stuff of scandal and soap opera to the extreme, much more than any so-called 'reality show'.

But perhaps even more scandalous is what happened at the end of our reading. Nathan (King David's assistant) lists his crimes and accuses him rightly of ingratitude against God who raised David up to be king in the first place. In response, David cannot run away or hide, he cannot pass the buck or claim "it's not my fault"—all he can do is hang his head in shame and say "I have sinned against the Lord." An open confession of sin, to which Nathan responds: "the Lord on his part has forgiven your sin."

Is it possible? Does God forgive even such terrible sins as those of which David was guilty? Yes. It may seem grossly unfair to our way of thinking that David should get off so easy. Actually, he did not get off all that easily—the Old Testament tells us that David suffered much adversity as the result of his sins. But he was still forgiven by God. For those who are tempted to desire revenge against sinners and evildoers, or at least to look down on them with disdain, it may scandalize them to think that God could forgive in such a seemingly matter-of-fact or even cavalier way.

That attitude is very much present in Simon the Pharisee in today's gospel. He invites Jesus to his home for dinner, and Jesus—who enjoyed sharing meals with others—accepted. While at Simon's table, a woman known publicly as a sinner (though we do not know her sins) comes to Simon's house and washes and anoints Jesus' feet. Simon is indeed scandalized and thinks: "if Jesus was really a prophet, he would surely know who and what this low-life really is and he wouldn't even let her near him." Jesus turns the tables (as he always does) and praises the woman's acts of kindness and hospitality while gently chiding Simon, the host, for not doing the same. Jesus then goes even farther and assures the woman that her sins are forgiven. Scandal once again erupts as the others complain to each other: "who is this who would dare to forgive sins—something only God can do?" But Jesus does not back down, he does not take back his word or his gift of forgiveness; he simply praises her faith and dismisses her in peace.

What was it about both King David and this anonymous woman that won for them the healing power of God's forgiveness? It was their simple, humble, honest confession and repentance of sin, whether by word (as with David) or by humble service (as with the woman). That confession and that repentance was very powerful—it opened up the gates of divine love and healing mercy such that those gifts washed David and the sinful woman clean of sin and gave them the grace, the divine wherewithal to turn away from sin and lead lives newly dedicated to holiness, love and genuine peace.

I have asked you this question before, and I will ask it again: what is your picture of God? How do you imagine that God looks on you? Do you see God as one who is just waiting for you to mess up, to fall into serious sin so that he can condemn you to eternal punishment with a vengeful glee? That is **not**—I repeat, **not** the God of either the Old Testament or the God of Jesus Christ in the New Testament. Make no mistake: God surely challenges us to reject sin, to repent of sin and to seek and grow in holiness. Jesus surely warns us of the consequences of deliberately staying in sin and rejecting his love and mercy. But that is because he loves us so profoundly and so completely that he will do everything he can to lead us back to him—he does not want us to be lost in eternal separation from him.

What parents will not exhaust all possible efforts to encourage a wayward child to return home to their love and protection? Multiply that effort by infinity—and that is how much God desires and longs for every single one of us and of all his children to return to him. [Yesterday] / On Friday we celebrated the feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, a devotion that goes back many centuries and is intended to remind us of the infinite, burning, passionate love that God has shown us through his Son. The heart has long been a symbol of love; think of all those heart-shaped cards and boxes of candy on Valentine's Day! And so it makes sense to honor that heart of Jesus, he who is the ultimate proof of God's love for us.

Are we scandalized by this amazing love of God? Can we accept and believe in the radical truth that a simple and humble act of repentance and a genuine desire to turn away from sin—no matter how serious—is enough to assure us of the complete forgiveness of God? Remember the sins committed by King David (we can surely call them mortal sins), and remember also that his repentance and contrition opened to him the floodgates of God's mercy. In our second reading today St. Paul reminded the Galatians that we are justified not by works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ—he whose death on the Cross is the ultimate proof of God's forgiveness and of his desire for our reconciliation and reunion with him.

We cannot claim a “right” to God's mercy, we cannot claim to deserve it or that God somehow “owes” it to us. But God does offer us the free, unmerited gift of his mercy; he does so lovingly, completely and unconditionally to anyone who sincerely seeks it. Repentance, turning from sin, trusting in the mercy of God, rejoicing in and living the undeserved gift of divine love that is Jesus Christ: this is our path to salvation, the way to eternal joy. And it is the way of scandal—the scandal of God's forgiveness.