

When I was a newly ordained priest down in Tacoma my Pastor, Fr. Pat Ritter, and I would often go out to dinner after Saturday night mass. One Saturday night we were sitting in a restaurant and in walked the teenage son of one of the parish families. I'll call him Jack, accompanied by a young lady. They were obviously going to the Prom. He was in his tuxedo and she was in a fancy gown. Fr. Pat and I knew Jack well. His family was very active in the parish. I had been over to his house for dinner, etc. As the waiter led them through the restaurant I could see that they were heading for the empty table next to us – and the tables weren't far apart.

I started to laugh inside. I couldn't help thinking Jack would not be pleased to be seated next to two priests who knew him – probably not the perfect set-up for a romantic evening. This might be enjoyable, I thought. When Jack recognized us it was great to see his face. It was a mixture of surprise and then dread, as it hit him. "I'm spending a good part of Prom night next to my parish priests!"

Sure enough, the waiter sat them next to us. I greeted Jack – he had no choice but to introduce Cindy (or whatever her name was – I don't remember) to us. They may have thought it awkward. I thought it was perfect. They were in my clutches! I was thinking up embarrassing things to say to the two teenagers. “Hey, Cindy, are you Catholic? Do you want to be?” “If you two get married will you raise your children Catholic?” “Jack, don't do anything tonight I wouldn't do – ha, ha, ha.” It would be like a cat playing with two mice.

But I never really had the chance. After just a short time Fr. Pat called over the waiter and said, “This young man is a member of my parish. He and his date might be more comfortable at another table.” The waiter stared – and then smirked, and led the relieved couple to the other side of the room.

Today is Divine Mercy Sunday. I think of Fr. Pat's act that evening as an act of mercy. Here was a young man caught. He couldn't very well ask to be moved away from his Pastor. He was stuck – but Fr. Pat let

him off. It was a just small matter – more amusing than anything. But many of us have a much greater need for mercy – over much graver matters. We have sinned badly. Jack hadn't sinned in my example – other than some things he might have said under his breath when he saw who he was sitting next to. But many of us are caught in much bigger traps, unable to relieve ourselves from the burden of what we've done. What is Jesus' attitude towards us when He finds us in that situation?

In today's gospel passage we hear about Jesus coming to the Apostles on the night He rose from the dead. And the first thing on His agenda is providing for us a way to receive His Father's forgiveness and mercy. That is how important mercy is to Jesus. We Catholics have always seen Jesus' words here as establishing the Sacrament of Reconciliation. He gives the Apostles and their successors the power to forgive sins. "Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained."

The power to forgive sins lies in God alone. That is also something to take away from the gospel – that Jesus is divine. So, what should we think about Jesus' attitude to us sinners? I think some of us believe that He can't, or won't, forgive us – won't show us mercy. The image we have of Jesus' attitude towards us sinners might be more that of my own pleasure that evening in the restaurant when I had Jack in my sights. We think, "Jesus wants to hurt us, torture us, play with us. He has us in His power and feels no need to let us go."

But that is not how Jesus sees us. Jesus loves us enough to die for us. He shows the Apostles the nail wounds in His hands and side to remind them of this. And from this love flows His mercy. He is like Fr. Pat rather than like me. Fr. Pat could feel what that couple felt and what they had hoped for from that night. And so he blessed them.

Jesus is not out to get us – or punish us. He doesn't want to make us squirm. He has the deep sympathy of One who created us out of love – and knows to the very depths of our souls all we think and feel.

Whenever we'll accept it, Jesus wants to show us mercy and give us His forgiveness. The punishment we receive is always that which we take upon ourselves. If we won't accept Jesus' forgiveness and mercy, then we are stuck with our guilt and our isolation from Him. That, ultimately, is our punishment – to be separated from God: a choice we make, first in choosing sin, and second in refusing to ask for His mercy out of fear or pride.

On this Divine Mercy weekend, we should remember that none of us need be stuck in our sins and failings. Don't forget the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Don't fear it. Jesus' very reason for coming as one of us was to release us from our shame and guilt. He wants our happiness. He wants to bless us, if we would only accept His mercy.