

God's forgiveness as a hand on the shoulder

By JAMES K. HEALY

It was a dilemma for my grandfather. The pastor had ordered his son, my father, to do public penance, to kneel at the altar rail throughout a Sunday Mass. Why? To repent for failing to show for an altar boy assignment. But the absence was not my father's fault. It was Grampa's. He'd kept his son home to help with essential family chores. Back then, people had such reverence for priests, even when they weren't being very priestly, that my grandfather simply told my father: Do as the pastor said.

Imagine the shame my father must have felt as he went up the aisle to be humiliated in front of the whole parish at the sacrifice of the Mass. His legs trembled as he knelt. He wished he were dead. Suddenly, his humiliation was transformed. He felt a hand on his shoulder, looked up and saw his father, kneeling by his side.

That story, to my family a very sacred story, helps make some sense of the odd behavior of Jesus, who came among us sinless but insisted on being baptized. Not only that, he demanded John's baptism of repentance, and everyone knew John's was a very stern message. John minced no words about the need for folks to publicly acknowledge their own sins and pledge to turn from their evil ways. (Even John thought it inappropriate for Jesus to have any part in such a ritual. He pleaded with Jesus to reverse roles with him.) Of course it was not the dramatic ritual that troubled John; it was the total innocence of Jesus. As a matter of fact, John might very well have agreed with those rabbis and priests

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who find virtue in shame and view humiliation as fair payment for our sins. If so, John would learn that Jesus had a very different message.

Jesus wants to erase our shame. He wants to take it upon himself and share our sense of helplessness. He knows we can face even the impossible if we don't have to face it alone. Jesus tells us shame is not a value in itself; there is no such

givenness, they bear the weight of sin and guilt. This is tragedy enough, but so often they must also endure shame and humiliation at the hands of those foolish enough to pass judgment on their neighbors.

The simple but staggering truth is this: We are forgiven in Christ. Repentance is the acceptance of that reality. To be repentant is to personally choose the embrace of God rather than the embrace of sin. God's arms are already wide open. To repent is to say to him, "Hug me, hold me." Yes, this is the truth. We are immersed in the unconditioned, loving forgiveness of Christ, but in God's strange way of doing things, it doesn't seem real or personal until a person makes it real. We need to know it, to taste it, to feel it. However deep our repentance, God's forgiveness becomes believable in the touch, the smile, the kindly word of another. The total willingness of Jesus to share our shame starts to seem real when a person we can see and touch, such as my grandfather at the altar rail, offers not judgment but compassion, not shame but love.

I'm sure that my father, when he was a little boy, had already been taught clearly by the sisters and his parents that God is love and God forgives. But I doubt it ever was so real to him as that day he felt a hand on his shoulder, looked up and saw his dad, ready to share his shame. ■



thing as repentance for its own sake. Humility — not humiliation — is a virtue. Repentance is Jesus' calling us to let go of our sins because they are unworthy of us as well as of him. He takes no delight in our shame. His call to repentance is at once a divine embrace of love and unconditioned acceptance.

One might say the great tragedy of our time is that the majority of the people on earth have not yet heard the good news of Jesus, and so, longing for for-

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