

HOMILY FOR JUNE 13, 2010 (11th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME)
2 Samuel 12:7-10, 13; Psalm 32 (vv.); Galatians 2:16, 19-21; Luke 7:36-8:3

Gone Astray, Sent Away, Coming Home

On a winter afternoon in 2005 Diana Ortiz heard the words she never thought she'd never hear: "You're going home." Her fellow inmates had gathered outside the room where she was meeting with her parole advisor. When the door opened and she stepped into the hallway with a smile on her face, there were cheers, tears and hugs all around.

It had been a long journey: twenty-two years, over half of her life spent in prison. As an 18 year-old drug addict with a 36 year-old boyfriend, Diana Ortiz had posed as a prostitute in a botched armed robbery that left an off-duty police officer dead. Frightened and with no prior criminal record, she turned herself in to the authorities. She was eventually convicted of second degree murder and sentenced to 17 years to life in prison.

After getting through her initial fear, despair, and anger at herself, Diana Ortiz got to work. She earned her GED, a bachelor's degree, and then a master's degree. After serving the initial 17 years of her sentence she became eligible for parole and applied. The parole board denied her request. Over the next three years, she applied three more times for parole; and each time she was denied.

She began to lose hope. "I felt it doesn't matter what I say...who I am or what I've done," she recalled thinking to herself. "It's never going to change; the crime will never change."

"The hard part about it," she added, "was that *I* changed." Finally, following her fifth parole hearing, some one made the politically risky decision to recognize it. After entering the New York state prison at age 18, Diana Ortiz left at 40. Today she works with Exodus Transitional Community in Harlem, a nonprofit group that helps newly released inmates adapt to life "on the outside." She completed her parole last year. Gone astray and sent away, she is finally home.

Diana Ortiz, like David and the unnamed "sinful woman" in our gospel reading, could not change her past. But she could change herself; and she did. While none of us may be guilty of taking another life, virtually all of us (if we're honest) can recall doing or saying something that we now deeply regret or is the cause of guilt or shame. Like Diana Ortiz, however, we can seize the chance to

change. As people of faith, we recognize that constant and abundant opportunity and ability to change as the work of God's grace. It's always there for us.

David was also a murderer. In fact, in some ways he was a worse murderer than Diana Ortiz. After getting Bathsheba, the wife of his loyal soldier Uriah, pregnant, David tried to cover it up by arranging for the death of Uriah in battle.

Despite all of the blessings that he had received from the Lord, David still wanted what he could not and should not have—another man's wife. Because he was King of Israel, though, he had the power to do it. David horribly abused his power and authority, and as we heard in our first reading, he would have to pay the consequences: God warned that his house would be tormented by violence and death. In short, he and his family would reap what he had sown.

Confronted with his misdeeds, David could only admit to Nathan, "I have sinned against the Lord;" and even though he violated the Fifth, Sixth and Ninth Commandments in his mistreatment of Bathsheba and Uriah, God forgave him. No matter what we have done, when we admit it and recognize it as sin, we give God's healing and forgiving grace the chance to begin to work in our lives.

Sometimes our experiences of that grace can be overwhelming. The "sinful woman" in today's gospel was so overcome by her experience of God's love that she couldn't even speak. Instead she stood behind Jesus, anointing his feet with costly ointment, weeping and wiping his feet with her hair. Simon the Pharisee, Jesus' host, was scandalized not only by what the woman did but even more by the fact that Jesus let her do it to him! In response, Jesus challenged Simon to reflect on his own self-righteousness, especially in light of his own lack of hospitality.

Simon was so focused on the sins of others that he forgot his own. As a Pharisee he thought he could save himself by his strict observance of the Jewish law; but he left no room for God's grace, not to mention compassion or humility. The woman labeled as "sinful," by contrast, responded to her experience of God's grace by an act of profound humility, graciousness, and love.

As St. Paul poignantly pointed out in our second reading, we can't save ourselves. There's nothing, no matter how great or heroic, that any of us can do to be justified, that is, to right our relationship with God. Instead, the good that we do is most powerful when it is our response in faith to what God has done for us. Having received God's grace and experienced its power in our lives, we can become vessels of that grace for each other and for the world. It is then that we realize with St. Paul, "I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me." +