

**My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,**

**Some of the most painful encounters I've had as a priest are with people who believe themselves to be unworthy of forgiveness. A woman who carried the pain of a teenage abortion for more than forty years. A soldier haunted by dreams night after night of the many people he killed in the midst of war. A man who cheated on the wife he loved again and again and again. And, yes, a priest who was unfaithful to his promise of celibacy for over twenty years.**

**But, perhaps the most painful was my Aunt Helen, the oldest of my Mother's sisters. She was a wonderful pleasant woman, welcoming and kind, but always had a kind of sadness to her. Though born and raised Catholic, she never went to Church, married Uncle Ray, a non-Catholic outside the Church, neither did she raise her children in the Church.**

**It was only after her death that her daughter told me her story. As a child she delighted in taking lunch to her father at his job as a stone mason. She would sit with him while he ate, relishing this time alone with him, since she was the oldest of four, with a fifth on the way. One day there was a problem that developed as they were enjoying their lunch. Her father jumped up and ran telling Helen to stay where she was. It seemed that the crane lifting the heavy stones into place was malfunctioning. Her Dad ran to fix it. Despite his warning, she ran after him. With that, the stone being lifted fell from the crane. Helen was right beneath it. Her father ran to save her. As he pushed her out of the way, the stone fell crushing his leg. Shortly thereafter he died.**

**Helen lived all her life, blaming herself for her father's death. She could not forgive herself. Nor did she believe God could ever forgive her. It was only on her deathbed at the age of 92, surrounded by her children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren, all of whom became Catholic, that she finally relented, forgave herself, and accepted the grace of God's already-forgiving love in the Sacraments of Reconciliation, Eucharist, and the Anointing of the Sick. She died smiling, thanking God for the gift of forgiveness and the gift of her family.**

**Aunt Helen, and all those I have known who have felt unworthy of forgiveness, come to mind when I hear this story of Jesus and the Samaritan Woman. This woman at the well was the last person Jesus should have paid attention to. First of all, she was a strange, unrelated woman. No man in the Middle East, then, or even now, speaks to a woman to whom he is not related. Secondly, she is a Samaritan, whom Jews regarded as heretics because they did not worship in Jerusalem. Finally, she was apparently a woman with, shall we say, a checkered past.**

**All Jesus sees is a person who needs Him. But, rather than approach her in this way, His approach is one of needing her. He asks her, “Give me a drink.” And, eventually, as the story unfolds, she comes to realize that in fact he is the Christ who is promising her everlasting life.**

**She is shocked! She runs into the town—the town where she is surely looked down upon and talked about, otherwise she would have been collecting her water at the well at dawn with the other women of the village, rather than alone at noon. She knows that to them she is a nobody. But, now, she has to tell anybody about somebody who has the power to save everybody. The townspeople are amazed. They have to see for themselves. They go to Jesus and invite him to stay with them, and they too come to believe that He “is truly the savior of the world”.**

**My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, in choosing to reveal Himself to this Samaritan woman and turning her into an Evangelist, Jesus is telling us that no one is beyond the reach of God’s already-forgiving love, and that each and every one of us, no matter how weak or sinful or failed we may feel ourselves to be is embraced by that love and then empowered by that love to “tell anybody about somebody who has the power to save everybody.” His name is Jesus and He comes to save us.**

**That’s why St. Paul tells us today, “For Christ, while we were still helpless, died at the appointed time for the ungodly. Indeed, only with difficulty does one die for a just person, though perhaps for a good person one might even find the courage to die. But God proves His love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.”**

**No one! None of us are beyond the reach of God’s mercy. First, convince yourself of that by accepting the grace of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Next Sunday is your opportunity. We will have 18 priests available to hear confessions and bestow the grace of God’s already-forgiving love. Don’t wait until you’re on your deathbed like Aunt Helen. Then, please go out there and tell them, like the Samaritan Woman at the well, convince them by telling your story of God’s mercy and love for you.**