

*Calvary Lenten Series*  
*Friday—March 29, 2019*

---

From the Gospel of St. Luke—

**“Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’”**

They were grumbling. **“This fellow Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them.”**

Among all the preachers this Lenten series at Calvary—well, I’m the only Roman Catholic preacher. How, then, could I stand before you *this* Lent and not speak about the clergy sex abuse crisis which is choking the spirit of our church—and doing so in public? Oh, I could begin by conveniently noting that the sexual abuse of minors is plaguing other church communions, as well as such groups as the Boy Scouts, schools, and those in the medical field. That is true. But, sisters and brothers, it is the Roman Catholic communion which makes the headlines week in and week out. It’s the ground zero of pain, of cover-up, and of fumbling for solutions.

I am angry, embarrassed, and ever bracing myself for a new wave of disclosure, pain and questions. Oh, in 2015 I made myself go to see the movie “Spotlight” when it came out. Deservedly the movie received the “best movie” Oscar of that year by the Academy Awards. “Spotlight” put before us how the *Boston Globe*, in 2002, uncovered the widespread and systemic child abuse in the Boston area by numerous priests—and the cover-up by church officials there. From that newspaper headline, the crisis exploded. This past August the Pennsylvania grand jury report listed three hundred priests who had been accused of abuse within that state alone. It was not stressed in the report, but since 2002, when the American Catholic bishops issued a charter for true protection of minors, only two priests have been involved in abuse within the dioceses of Pennsylvania covered in the report during the last twenty years. That is progress. Still, other cases are being made public now beyond the United States. The waves of abuse hit us as a global crisis within the church and world.

As I watched “Spotlight,” I felt like I was being kicked in the stomach. The movie shone the light as it pinpointed the pain and suffering of the innocent, the cruel calculation and crime committed by perpetrators, and the whitewash carried out by some of the highest church officials. And I wondered: If the *Boston Globe*, or another outside channel, had not ripped off the cover of this scandal, would the church had ever brought to light the clergy sex abuse crisis?

This past Ash Wednesday, the psalm for the Mass cried out, as a mantra, **“Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.”**

“...for *we* have sinned.” **“Be merciful, O Lord, for we have sinned.”** Yes, friends, Lent is not an isolated, solitary forty-day pilgrimage leading to the heart of the paschal mystery, that is, the celebration of Jesus’ death and resurrection—the Triduum, the great three nights beginning Holy Thursday through Easter Sunday. No, *we’re* called to do Lent together. This Lent, how can *we* begin to experience new life, Easter life, as we are still subject to this daily dying in the midst of so much suffering? It’s a valid question. I shall give only a tepid stab at an answer.

Over these years I’ve been privileged to listen to those who have been sexually abused as a minor by a priest. I’ve also listened to family members who have a loved one that has experienced such a horror. Again and again, pain, recurring flashbacks, and lost years—their Lent is too long, as their agony continues, as they ache for an Easter with true new life.

A month after the *Boston Globe* came out in January 2002 with its front-page expose about the sexual abuse of minors by priests, here in Memphis our bishop then, Bishop Terry Steib, had a regular meeting of all the priests. This scandal just opening up, Bishop Steib spoke about next steps which would be taken in West Tennessee. We priests had questions—all the while, clueless to how this nightmare would unfold. I can remember one of my closest priest friends, raising his hand and asking the question to the bishop: If one of us priests, falsely, is accused by someone: What recourse of support would that priest have? The bottom line, as I remember it: We’d pretty much be on our own. That fear stays with many priests. We’ve known others who have been falsely accused in other parts of the country. Finally exonerated, the stigma hangs over them.

From the Gospel of St. Luke—

**“Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’”**

This is the first two verses of the Gospel reading which many of our church communions will hear this Sunday. Then, the parable of the Prodigal Son follows, illustrating God’s reckless, prodigal mercy.

A year after the sex abuse crisis burst into the open, in 2003, as I did every Tuesday evening for years, I was having a Scripture reflection group with six parishioners, looking at the next Sunday’s readings. The group was always rotating; a parishioner came five times, and then rotated off, with another parishioner replacing her/him.

One Tuesday, we were studying together and reflecting on a Gospel story—there are so many of them—in which Jesus chose to keep company with those on the fringe—the discarded, the rejected, those viewed way beyond the margins.

So as we reflected together on the meaning of that Gospel story, I tossed out to the group the question: Who would those “on the outside” be *today*, whom Jesus would spend time with, while others kept their distance? In 2003, answers came out such as HIV+ folks, or those on the streets with addictions. Then somebody said, “Priests guilty of sexual abuse of a minor.” Heads nodded, and then I said without thinking, “Yes, a priest friend from another diocese is in prison for that crime.”

Then, Sylvia Johnson, a parishioner in the group, blurted out: “Father Val, have you visited him?”

Silence froze the room, the eyes of everyone in the group riveted on me. “No, I haven’t.”

Passionately, Sylvia shot back: “Father Val, you’ve *got* to visit him. You’ve got to visit him!”

I didn’t remember anything else said that night in the group. Sylvia’s shot stunned me. I don’t remember how I answered her, except with a feeble, “I will.”

It’s my custom every February to make a five-day visit to Nashville and visit a friend there. Just outside of Nashville, the now defrocked priest—Eddie

McKeown—was in the Riverbend Maximum Security Prison. He had confessed to the sexual abuse of multiple minors, and had been given a twenty-five year sentence. That next February, after Sylvia Johnson’s mandate to me, I called and requested a visit at the prison. It was never a sure thing, getting a date and time. Once or twice, the request was denied because of stuff within the prison, or the official on the other side of the request.

I got the appointment. I drove up to the prison. Only thing in my pockets when I arrived at the main office were my driver’s license and my car key. I was carefully searched, and then went through, escorted by a guard, from one metal gate through another. Barbed wire on the fences all around. Finally, I got to a room and waited. Then, another guard brought in Eddie. In college, during summers, we had worked together at a church camp. He had driven to Memphis to come to my priesthood ordination. Now, he was in a prison uniform, he sitting across from me...the two of us alone, with a guard on the other side of a closed door.

A monster. That’s how folks saw Eddie, and his ilk. We talked, never about the abuse he had done. He told me how students from Vanderbilt Divinity School came regularly to teach Scripture and theology classes to prisoners who wanted to participate. He pointed out, through the window in our room, the building which housed those on death row, and where they were executed.

That hour visit, my first visit—I thought it would never end. We had no problems finding stuff to talk about. And, we prayed together. But, I felt the discomfort. I wonder if I hid it from Eddie. Gradually, and especially in subsequent visits, I became more at ease. I went the first time—honestly, mainly to placate Sylvia. A lay parishioner, she had pushed me out of my comfort zone. She nudged me in the direction of *Jesus*’ ministry. I came to make other visits because I chose to—trying to live into the Gospel.

**“Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’”**

Eddie died this past Christmas week in prison of natural causes. I had learned in some detail the monstrous things Eddie had done. Jesus teaches us that Eddie—and *we*—despite our monstrous sins and evil, are never beyond Jesus’ prodigal compassion. I learned that’s a hard thing really to believe, even harder to practice. It takes us way out of our comfort zones.

Friends: What Sylvia is pushing you out of your comfort zone to reach outside the margins? Or, rather, is our *Jesus* calling us this Lent to reach out of our comfort zone? Is Jesus calling us to cross over into those fearful, embarrassing, unknown margins—to people who are seen as monsters? And once we are there, can we share in our brokenness, too, the experience of Jesus' prodigal love?

We might share that love by shouting out until we're dry-throat, in order to get church leaders to be truly transparent. We might also share that love by being ready to come face-to-face with those who've been sexually abused—by priests, or by others—and listening, caring, and hoping with them. They're all around.

And, we might do penance like the 16<sup>th</sup> century mixed-race lay Dominican brother, St. Martin de Porres. Throughout his life Martin poured out Jesus' love on all who were counted as nothing then—Peruvian Indians, the poor, and the sick left to languish.

Martin de Porres also did his Lenten penance, year-round—fasting, depriving himself by living a hard asceticism. When he was questioned “why,” St. Martin mumbled something about the vastness of sins to be atoned for. You see, Martin saw the sins of *his* day—slavery, the injustice and contempt heaped on the Peruvian Indians (As we're doing to so many immigrants in *our* time?)—and Martin knew he shared in the sin, as part of an ever-broken church and world, needing healing (1).

**“Be merciful, O Lord, for *we* have sinned.”**

Sisters and brothers: We're in this together. All along, Jesus keeps reminding us with whom *he* chose to keep company.

(1) See Robert Ellsberg, All Saints: Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets, and Witnesses for Our Time (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001), pp. 479-80.

