

We are not prisoners of our past

Homily by Most Reverend John T. Folda, Bishop of Fargo

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Cass County Jail
Fargo, ND*

Dear friends, I'm very happy to be with all of you today. We are in the last days of the season of Lent, and it's a special time of grace for all of us. Jesus reminds us that when we look to him with faith, and when we put our lives in his hands, we share in the mercy and redemption that he offers us.

As you might know, we are in the midst of a special Jubilee Year of Mercy. Pope Francis has called upon the Church to meditate even more on the great mercy of God, which is greater than we can imagine. God's mercy is even greater than any sin. No sin is too great for God to forgive if we truly repent and desire his forgiveness. So whatever our state in life might be, this is a year of grace, a time of opportunity for us to experience the mercy of Jesus even more fully than ever before.

The Pope has also called for each diocese to have a Holy Door, a Door of Mercy in our cathedral. This is a symbol of Christ as the door to forgiveness and mercy. When we pass through the holy door with prayer and a spirit of repentance, we remember that Jesus is the door, the gateway to heaven. By entering through Christ, we can receive all the mercy and grace that he has to give. It's a symbolic action, like making the sign of the cross, but it's a vivid reminder that Jesus is the only way to eternal life. And when we pass through the holy door, we can receive an indulgence, a setting free from the price of our sins, the punishment that we deserve for our sins. In justice, we must pay a price for our sins, but God's mercy tempers his justice, and he grants us this indulgence to make our journey to him even easier.

Now you might be thinking that's all well and good for others, but you can't pass through that door and experience this grace. But Pope Francis remembers you who are incarcerated. He has a suggestion for you too. He said that even your own cell door can be a kind of holy door. When you pass through that door, you too can remember that Jesus is the gateway to the Father's mercy. When you pass through your own cell door right here with your heart turned to Christ, you can receive his mercy and experience his love for you. I would suggest that you try to make this a daily habit. Turn your thoughts and prayers to God every time you step across the door of your cell in the morning, and realize you are united with all the faithful who make that same gesture at the Cathedral, or anywhere else. You can experience God's mercy just like they do.

Pope Francis said, "Celebrating the Jubilee of Mercy with you means learning not to be prisoners of the past, of yesterday. It means learning to open the door to the future, to tomorrow; it means believing that things can change. We can write a new story, just as the story of our Lord's crucifixion then became the story of his resurrection, which shows the power of God's divine mercy.

And this begins right here, where you are right now. You have the power from our Lord to keep alive the hope of the Gospel of mercy, even here in a jail. You might think you are somewhat limited in what you can do here, but I have some suggestions for you. First, you have an opportunity to pray every day for others who are in need. You can be a prayer warrior, and every prayer is heard by our Lord. You can certainly pray for your own families, your friends, all your loved ones. You can pray for those who are with you right here. You can pray for the poor, the homeless. You can pray for the Church. You can

pray for peace. And you can pray for complete strangers whom you'll never meet or know. But God knows, and someday in heaven, one of them may come up and thank you for your prayers that helped him come to the Lord and get to heaven.

And you can also be men and women of charity. Every day you can show kindness to another person, even just a greeting, or a listening ear. Maybe being patient with someone or giving them a hand when they're struggling. All of these acts of charity, or mercy, can bring you closer to the heart of Jesus, and Jesus can work through you to bring his Kingdom a little closer to completion.

Never forget that God loves you as his own sons and daughters, and he has a mission for you. Be people of mercy. Be people of prayer and charity, and begin to write a new story of hope in Christ.