

Fourth Sunday of Easter

I can still remember filling out an application for a summer job when I was in college. The form requested all the information you'd expect - name, address, phone, and prior employment. It also had a checkbox asking if I'd ever committed a felony. I was taken aback because not only had I never been arrested, I didn't know anyone who had been. The box still exists on many application forms, but different States have initiated "Ban the Box" legislation because they feel that the question is unfair.

Many people applying for a job will not get a chance if they have to acknowledge their criminal record. Yet when people leave prison, they have completed their sentence. Their punishment is supposed to be over. Then they discover it's hard to find work, rebuild relationships, and even vote, depending on where they live. The section of government that takes care of prisoners is known by the idealistic title, "Department of Corrections," not the "Department of Everlasting Condemnation." We hope people make a correction in their behavior. We owe them a second chance. If you know someone to be dangerous, obviously you have to take precautions. And there are other ways to find out a person's criminal record. But people can change. All of us change. We can all look back at who we were in the past and realize that we made some decisions and said some things that we wish we hadn't. But somebody gave us a second chance, our relationships got stronger, and we became wiser and better-behaved.

One of the greatest conversion stories belongs to St. Paul. He first appears in Acts of the Apostles as Saul, the leader of a group of Hellenists stoning the disciple Stephen to death. Then he had an encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. He learned about Christianity and became one of its greatest apostles. Saul started preaching about Christ right there in Damascus, but in doing so he made enemies. They stood at the gates of the city, waiting for him to leave, so that they could kill him. Saul's friends hid him in a basket and lowered him over the city wall to escape. That's where today's first reading picks up the story. Saul walked into a group of disciples in Jerusalem who knew his reputation as a murderer of Christians. In a sense, he wanted a job as an evangelizer, but he had checked the felony box on his application form. So he told them, "I've changed. I'm a Christian now." They didn't believe him. Barnabas spoke on Saul's behalf, saying that "he had seen the Lord, and that he had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus." So they gave Saul a second chance. He spoke faithfully about Jesus, but now he made enemies out of the same Hellenists who killed Stephen. His Christian friends helped him escape again, and he fled all the way from Jerusalem back home to Tarsus, 500 miles away. Paul continued a tremendous career of preaching and writing about Jesus. But you have to wonder where we'd be today if the first Christians in Jerusalem hadn't given him a second chance.

When someone offends us, we sometimes make up our minds that they cannot change. It does no one any good. Anyone can change, but most people will do it only if the first mind to change is ours - if we come to the realization that they deserve a second chance.