

The guys I visit in Cameron's prison are all anxious to get out and start life over again, but one of the problems they face upon release is getting a job. When they apply, someone or some form may ask them, "Have you ever been convicted of a felony?" Very few people want to hire an ex-con, and once you have a felony in your past, it never leaves. It's like an unforgiven sin. One or two of the prisoners have told me that when they get out, they'd like to become more active in the church. One even asked me, "Do you think I could become a deacon in the Catholic Church?" I found myself thinking, "There's no way." Yet theoretically, everyone deserves a second chance. No matter what you've done in the past, if you set your goals higher, you ought to be able to achieve them. But it doesn't always work that way. You may think you can change, but if you never do, people would be foolish to believe you. If you have made some changes in your life, then everybody else should change how they think about you and what opportunities they give you.

Today's first reading from Acts of the Apostles opens with this statement: "When Saul arrived in Jerusalem he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple." You remember this story: Saul is the one who becomes St. Paul. He persecuted Christians. He had a reputation for it. Then one day on a lonely road to Damascus he fell to the earth beneath a blinding light, and it completely changed his life. He no longer killed Christians; he lived as a Christian. After this event he shows up in Jerusalem and tries to join the disciples, but they were all understandably afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple now. When he walked into that room, they probably thought to themselves, "There's no way." But Barnabas took charge, spoke on Saul's behalf, and convinced everyone they should accept him. Then the shoe went on the other foot. Saul the former persecutor preached Christ to the Gentiles, and they tried to kill him. So the other disciples rescued him and sent him home where he could preach to people who knew him better. Everything became peaceful, and the church grew in numbers.

That is why we sing this psalm today, "I will praise you, Lord, in the assembly of your people." You can almost hear St. Paul singing this himself after personally escaping persecution. He was praising the Lord in the safe company of other Christians. "I will praise you, Lord, in the assembly of your people." He found comfort among the people who gave him a second chance.

We Christians try to live with one another in peace. Sometimes it is hard. It is hard to give another chance to someone who has done something hurtful because some people keep causing the same hurts over and over again, no matter how many chances they get. Other times, we're just being stubborn, and someone who did something wrong deserves another chance to make a contribution, deserves another chance after which they may praise the Lord in the assembly of God's people.