

Twenty-fourth Sunday of the Year ON FORGIVENESS Mt. 18:21-35

We all know how hard it can be to forgive. At the same time, we know how lovely it is to be Forgiven. We always begin Mass by asking God for Forgiveness. As we reflect of this Gospel of Matthew today, let us ask the Good Lord, to give us the grace to be able to forgive those who have sinned against us.

Peter asks Jesus a question a lot of us would like to ask in Today's Gospel: : "***How many times should I forgive someone?***" That is a vital question to a lot of people. How many times do you forgive someone who works for you before you hand him or her a pink slip? How many times do you forgive someone you work for before you start looking for another job? How many times do you forgive a friend before you quit making arrangements for lunch? How many times do you forgive a marriage partner before you walk away from the relationship? How many times do you forgive a parent or an adult child or a brother or sister before you wash your hands of them? "How many times should I forgive?" Peter asks. "**Seven times?**"

Jesus answers, "**Not seven times, but, I tell you, 77 times.**" Whoops! That's not the way we learned it in Sunday school. It was 70 times 7 back then. Does this New Revised Standard Version of the Bible give us a new revised standard of forgiveness? A leaner, meaner standard for the '90s? Does it mean that the good old days when you could count on someone forgiving you 490 times are over and now you only get forgiven 77 times and then no more Mr. Nice Guy? Actually, the way the number is written here is ambiguous in Greek. It could be seventy times seven, but scholars say that it is more likely that it means 77. Of course, everybody who ever went to Sunday school or who has sat through a respectable number of sermons knows that it doesn't matter if it is 77 times or 490 times.

Jesus is just saying, "Forgive and forgive and forgive." We all nod our heads and say "Amen," and then we leave church and still wonder how many more customers we can afford to lose because of that new salesman before we fire him. We still wonder how many more emotional outbursts from the boss that we will take before we walk. We still wonder how many more times a loved one will come home drunk before we have the locks changed. We still wonder how many more times we can stand being belittled by an in-law before we stay away from family gatherings.

This is supposed to be a parable of forgiveness, but no one is forgiven. And remember, that king who has just ordered this terrible sentence of thousands of years of suffering is the very one to whom Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of heaven is not only like a king who forgives a huge debt, but the kingdom of heaven is also like a king who exacts a terrible punishment for the sin of unforgiveness. Then Jesus, himself, pounds the point home: "*So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.*"

The theme of all our readings this weekend is on **forgiveness**. Reading news-papers, we can see what unforgiveness does to nations, as they keep trying to get revenge on one another for some real or imagined act of cruelty. Some of the battles between different peoples have roots that go back hundreds of years. Many still live by the ancient principle of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." That rule was meant to keep a person from exacting more revenge than what was appropriate. In other words, if someone knocked out one of your teeth, you could only knock out one of theirs and no more! I couldn't find the exact quote, but I think it was Martin Luther King who said, if we all insisted on an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, soon everyone in the world would be blind and toothless. In the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 6, 38), Jesus told us that's no longer the rule we should live by. Today's

parable illustrates his position of forgiveness. We can't hold on to hating and desire for revenge. We have to let go.

Hurts are not easy to deal with. As soon as we get hurt self-pity walks in our front door — which is only natural. But once self-pity is entertained, it produces a legacy of bitterness, resentment, and anger. The memory of wrongs flows inwards where it festers. It poisons our spirit, and destroys our capacity to love. Some people have years of stored hurts inside them.

From time to time the cellar of the mind and heart has to be cleaned out. The cobwebs of self-pity have to be swept away. The cancerous growth of bitterness has to be cut out. Hurt feelings have to be dug up, owned and then let go.

Here is where forgiveness comes in. Though never easy, even from a human point of view it makes great sense. We rid ourselves of the burden of bitterness and resentment. As a result, we experience a sense of freedom, relief, and cleanness. Once again we are able to devote all our energies to loving, which is the only activity that befits a Christian. Forgiveness is first and foremost a healing of our own hearts. It is precisely our hearts that are wounded.

A couple of comments might help us get a feel for Jesus' parable in today's Gospel. Our translation is very weak and does not give the full impact of what was going on. It spoke of "a huge amount" that a servant owed his king and then of "a much smaller amount" that was owed. The original version (in the Greek) says the man owed his king ten thousand talents. In today's money that would be about 2 or 3 billion dollars. In that society it was customary for people who couldn't pay off their debts to be sold into slavery. The king's generosity was beyond belief. The man whose debt was cancelled was owed (again looking at the original Greek) a hundred denarii. Translated int.: today's dollars, that's about \$5000. It boggles our mind to think that anyone could be as selfish as the man in today's gospel. He was given so much and, in spite of the unbelievable example of generosity shown by his king, he hadn't learned how to be generous toward others.

Refusing to forgive is a form of anger, anger we will not let go of (or as the first reading describes it so poetically, anger that a person hugs tight). The man in the parable who refused to forgive his fellow servant may have been motivated by selfishness or pettiness or greed or by the refusal to let anyone take advantage of him. I think in most cases, however, when someone refuses to let go of their anger it is because of pride. We tell ourselves, when we are hurt by someone, we should not have been treated like that. No doubt we were treated badly, but we do more harm to ourselves than to anyone else when we keep that anger alive in us.

It will only eat us up emotionally and maybe even physically. As a counselor I have seen what unforgiveness does to the individual who cannot let go of pain or hurt someone has caused them. Jesus' admonition to forgive is good not only spiritually but psychologically too. One of the people we often have difficulty forgiving is ourselves. We do something we are embarrassed about or ashamed of and we continue to beat ourselves up.

Obviously today's Gospel parable is about forgiveness, but there is another important element to it and that is that we must not forget how generous God has been to us. Dear my family of faith, every time we enter this sanctuary of St. Ann or any other Christian Sanctuary, we have a symbol of the forgiveness that has been extended to us. It is the cross. Accept the grace that is offered to you every time you go to any church, in the name of that One who has forgiven you a debt which you cannot possibly repay, extend grace to others.

Amen