

Homily For the 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time - Year A
St. Peter's Sunday 8:00/9:30 Masses - September 17, 2023

Sirach 27:30-28:7 *"Forgive your neighbour a wrong and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray."*

Psalms 103:1-12 *"It is the Lord who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases."*

Romans 14:7-9 *"Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living."*

Matt 18:21-35 *"Lord, how often should I forgive my brother or sister when they sin against me."*

A Heart For Forgiveness

Introduction

There are a number of things about the Christian life which are difficult. Following Jesus, acting like Jesus, being kind like Jesus. And then of course there is taking up our cross and following Jesus. But I think there are two which top the list for the hardest things that we experience towards which to apply Christian faith and life.

One of those is dealing with suffering and loss. I get it why some even leave the faith because they cannot reconcile a loving God with bad things happening, especially to those we consider good people. But God knows. That's why God gave us his Son to suffer for us and with us so our suffering would have meaning.

Today we have what I consider the other hardest issue to deal with as a Christian. That's forgiveness. Sooner or later everyone has been hurt in some way that forgiving the person or people or organization who have hurt us is very hard. Sooner or later everyone has been hurt so badly that we carry around with us scars or open wounds in our hearts and souls, so deeply that it affects our relationships and our ability to live free and joy filled lives. Forgiveness is one of the most radical teachings of Christ.

A husband of five years was always amazed at how his wife never seemed to hold anger against him, always forgiving his little transgressions during their conflicts. One day he asked her secret. She said that when she was frustrated with him and tempted to be angry, she just cleaned the toilet. He asked how that would help. She answered: "I use your toothbrush."

There are several ways that people respond to the demand of forgiveness: I can forgive but I can never forget. Usually that means that it's not really forgiveness. I can forget but I can never forgive. That's just suppressing the hurt. I will always remember what you did to me. That's an ongoing desire for revenge. Time heals all wounds. That's a denial of the hurt. But God says when we ask for forgiveness for our sins: "I will remember their sins no more when they turn to me.

One sibling said to another at the sign of peace during the funeral of their mother: "I never want to see you again." The psalmist says that God does not deal with us according to our sins. However he does deal with us according to how we hang on to our sins. St. Paul reminds the Church at Rome that all will stand before God and be judged by one who judges perfectly, not according to human jealousies.

Sirach

Forgiveness is perhaps harder than anything else we can do in the moral life. The writer of Sirach says that "anger and wrath, these are abominations, yet a sinner holds on to them. Sirach was written in 175 BC in Alexandria. It's a collection of wisdom writings. Wrath and anger are hateful, yet the sinner 'hugs them tight.' That's the meaning. We know that hanging on to old resentments are destructive, yet we hug them tight. The deadly anger is a passion for revenge that goes beyond the control of reason. It's not the desire to set things right but the desire to hurt and punish.

This is so important that it is written into the entire text of Sacred Scripture. Jesus takes up in the Our Father what is already in the Word of God. "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. The heart of the sinner is hanging on to the anger. It is an intention to remain angry and not to forgive. Everyone knows how hard it is to forgive but what is the gravest of sins? It is to keep the anger.

To forgive and to forget is the divine attribute. What, God forgets? Yes, this is how SS describes it throughout all of salvation history. "I will remember their sins no more."

Set aside all hostility, stop obsessing about vengeance. Vengeance feels good at the time. It is one of Satan's empty promises. Movies play on this. But it's false. It is wisdom of the world.

Matthew

Peter consults Jesus about the limit of forgiveness. He conveys the frustration people feel when they have forgiven multiple times. When is enough? When do I get to stop? When will God be satisfied? The answer is 'never'. Don't even keep track. Jesus is not saying that we let people harm us whenever they want, or that forgiveness frees them from consequences.

Some rabbis considered three times enough to forgive for the same offense. So Peter probably figures seven as pretty generous and charitable. In the ancient world there was no limit on how much revenge someone could take for a wrong. So Jesus says the opposite. Not seven times but seventy seven times. That's an infinity.

To explain this, Jesus uses a parable. One talent is 15 years wages. 10000 talents is impossible. Can you imagine a thousand credit cards maxed out? What if the card company called and said the debt was cancelled. 100 denarii is a pittance in comparison. Prison until he should pay the debt was the consequence under the law. The 100 denarii owed by the second servant was just a few days wages. The forgiven servant let dark emotions take over and demanded from the other servant what he himself had been forgiven. The translation of the wording is that "he was not wanting to forgive that debt."

The first and most important point is to realize how much we have been forgiven. If we internalize this, then the infinity of mercy we are to show others becomes possible, what was previously impossible. it was an infinity of impossibility. If we fail to give mercy to others, we make it impossible for God to forgive us. We prepare ourselves for a hellish existence.

A mother had emotionally abused her daughter all the while she grew up. They did not speak for many years until the mother had a stroke and was unable to

function or to communicate. She had no one. The daughter began to sit with her, Over a period of time, she was able to forgive her mother.

Some injuries are so deep that it is not in our power not to feel or to forget an offense. Nevertheless, if we remember how much God has forgiven us, and if we can just ask God to soften our hearts, then we can avoid becoming like that unforgiving servant. The heart that offers itself to the Holy Spirit turns injury into compassion and purifies the memory in transforming the hurt into intercession.

Most of the hurts are small. If we refuse to forgive the small debts people owe us, we lose God's forgiveness. We make ourselves unable to receive that mercy. Forgiveness is not superficial but from the heart.

Both Sirach and Jesus tie forgiveness very closely to God's forgiveness. How often does God forgive us? Constantly. He comes running after us, like the father of the prodigal son.

So when we hear Jesus say on a number of occasions that you must forgive those who have hurt and those with whom you are angry, we will always be tempted to say: Don't ask me that, Jesus. Ask me to pray every day. Ask me to be kind to others. Those things are hard enough for me. Ask me anything else but don't ask me that. I just can't do it.

Call To Conversion

A nun gave little Mary a long talk on sin, prayer, and forgiveness. When she finished the lesson, she asked little Mary, "What do we have to do before we ask the Lord for forgiveness?" Little Mary Confidently said, "Sin"

We have been forgiven much so. It's a gift which God has given us, so we have to give that gift to others. If we forgive others, God will forgive us. If we do not, God will give us mercy in the same measure that we are willing to give others.

Today you and I are given the task first to let God into our hearts, not to keep in a place where we can just look at him and make him nice. God is not just nice. God is love. Love is more than nice.

Jesus' point is that forgiveness is not about quantity, the number of times we extend forgiveness to another. The lesson is clear. If we hoard God's mercy while showing no mercy to others, we risk forfeiting the effects of God's mercy in our lives. Our compassion towards others directly influences the mercy we receive from God. The great sign of forgiveness is Jesus on the cross. He did not do this so we wouldn't have to but so we would know it was possible.

Take a concrete step this week. Go the extra mile: A note or call etc. Invite the resumption of a relationship that is broken. Forgive quickly. Don't let it fester. Maybe the older the resentment the better. Don't talk behind peoples' backs. It is spiritual death. It feeds anger.

Yesterday, I saw a man who had hurt me. I realized then, because I was preparing for today, that I still had some work to do. What if we have trouble forgiving ourselves. Peter hurt Jesus badly. It took three affirmations of his love to accept that Jesus really did forgive him.

Francis of Assisi called himself the worst sinner in the world. He said, you don't know me from the inside. In order to feel guilt, you have to have a heart that knows it has done wrong. Forgiveness is the most striking manifestation of God's love. It is the ultimate distinction.

It is not in our power not to forget an offense. But the heart that offers itself to the Holy Spirit turns injury into compassion and purifies the memory in transforming the hurt into intercession" (CCC 2843)

Key Passages

Entrance Antiphon: *Give peace, O Lord, to those who wait for you. Hear the prayers of your servant, and of your people Israel.*

Collect: *Look upon us, creator and ruler of all things. Grant that we may serve you with all our heart.*

Sirach: *Anger and wrath, these are abominations, yet a sinner holds on to them. Forgive your neighbour the wrong that is done, and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray. Does anyone harbour anger against another, and expect healing from the Lord? If one has no mercy toward another can one then seek pardon for one's own sins? Remember the end of your life and set enmity aside. Remember the commandments and do not be angry with your neighbour. Remember the covenant of the Most High and overlook faults.*

Psalms: *Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me bless his holy name and do not forget all his benefits. It is the Lord who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases. He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger forever. He does not deal with us according to our sins. For as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us.*

Romans: *Brothers and sisters, if we live, we live to the Lord and we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.*

Matthew: *Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, how often should I forgive my brother or sister if they sin against me? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times but I tell you seventy seven times. The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. One who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' The lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii. Seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me and I will pay you.' But he refused. Then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said, 'you wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.*