

“Learning to Forgive”.¹

Homily for September 16-17, 2017

I have entitled this homily “Learning to Forgive. Forgiveness does not just happen but is something that we need to learn. The harbouring of resentment and choosing not to forgive; this is what comes much more naturally to us. Learning to forgive, is according to Jesus, so important for us, because only those who are learning the way of forgiveness will in turn know deeply the forgiveness of our heavenly Father.

Why is learning to forgive so important?

To answer this let me begin with a story.

Immaculee Ilibagiza was a 22-year-old university student in the 1990s when terrible violence broke out in her home country of Rwanda. Hutus killed her parents, her brothers, and hundreds of her Tutsi friends. A Hutu pastor, who risked his life to save her, hid her and six other women. They lived in a small bathroom, a wooden wardrobe covering the door. For three months, they endured hunger, fear, and the sounds of soldiers in the house unsuccessfully searching for Tutsis.

In those cramped quarters, she began to pray the Rosary. Always she stumbled over the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." She knew that the prayer called her to forgive those who had killed her family and endangered her. She didn't think she could do it, but she realized she was consumed by hate. She was afraid she would become like the people who had killed her family. Nevertheless, in her mind, forgiving her family's killers was like forgiving the devil. Finally, afraid that her hate would crush her heart, she asked God to forgive those who had done her so much harm. Slowly, with God's help, she was able to let go and forgive her family's killers. Eventually, she even visited one of her brother's killers in prison, taking his hand and offering forgiveness. She says that forgiveness saved her life. "It's a new life, almost like a resurrection."

Forgiveness is so important. When we can forgive those who have so deeply wounded us because of their acts and attitudes of evil, our soul can be freed from the prison of hate, vindictiveness and revenge. When we know we have been forgiven, the feeling of alienation that our sin has caused the one we have sinned against can be healed and the bridge of reconciliation brings together those who had been long estranged.

¹ There is a moving short film on this theme called “The Confession”. You can find it here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dz4GlecaA-o&t=693>

You can see an extensive interview with Immaculee at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0LO2bycPdpQ>

As this limerick playfully states it:

“Forgiveness is a funny thing; it warms the heart and cools the sting”.

There is nothing like forgiveness to bring about that change in our souls that is like the new life and resurrection Immaculee described. Forgiveness was the fruit of her reaching out to the Hutu killer of her brother.

Forgiveness requires letting go and forgiveness is awakened when we experience the forgiveness of Jesus in our own lives.

The reading from Sirach is a warning that calls us to rid ourselves of resentment and bitterness towards others. Forgiveness does require letting go. The writer speaks of those who harbour anger and wrath. Think about it this way. A harbour is a place where boats come to dock but a harbour is not what a boat was made for. The boat is made for the open waters. If, however the boat remains moored to the dock and never goes beyond the harbour, the sailor will miss the experience of the open sea.

So too when we harbour anger. Such an attitude confines and constricts us because an unforgiving heart keeps us from knowing the freedom that those who sail on the seas of forgiveness encounter. When we harbour anger and wrath in our hearts they become hardened and unreceptive to the forgiveness of Jesus. Those who are embittered towards other people cannot have a personal relationship with the one toward whom we are ultimately heading, Jesus Christ. When we live in the harbour of unforgiveness Sirach’s pointed question underscores our predicament starkly:

***If one has no mercy toward another like himself,
can he then seek pardon for his own sins?***

That’s it isn’t it? Another like ourselves. In Jesus God became another like us and on the Cross his very first words were: “Father Forgive them”. He had mercy towards another like himself.

If we live tied to the dock of bitterness we can never travel towards the horizon of heaven. Sirach’s words put it pointedly.

***Remember the end of your life, and set enmity aside;
remember corruption and death, and be true to the commandments.
Remember the commandments, and do not be angry with your neighbor;
remember the covenant of the Most High, and overlook faults.***

It is in calling us to remember the need for mercy and forgiveness that Sirach is paired with Matthew 18 where we realize forgiveness is awakened when we ponder Jesus’ words to us today.

At that point Peter got up the nerve to ask, “Master, how many times do I forgive a brother or sister who hurts me? Seven?” Jesus replied, “Seven! Hardly. Try seventy times seven.

The rabbis of Jesus’ time taught that to forgive a person three times was the extent to which a person should go in showing mercy. Peter, knowing that Jesus would ask more of his followers, thought he was being generous in upping the number to seven times. But Jesus says, no Peter, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

This language is not meant to limit forgiveness to the high level of seventy-seven instances, but to express a boundless willingness to forgive one’s brother or sister. The increase from seven to seventy-seven recalls Lamech, who appears last in the genealogy of Cain’s family, a family that was filled with immorality, murder, and vengeance. Lamech boasts, “If Cain is avenged sevenfold, then Lamech seventy-sevenfold” we read in Genesis 4:24. Just as Cain’s descendants responded to their enemies with unlimited vengeance, so Christians should respond to sins committed against them with limitless forgiveness.

This is necessary both for the person who is asked to forgive and the one forgiven, as Jesus goes on to show us.

Now in the original language the debt of ten thousand talents, what the first servant owed, would have been an unimaginable amount of money. Like a billion dollars. At first the king is ready to give the man what he deserves. He can’t pay so he and his family will become enslaved. Notice that this man has no idea how great is the debt owed, as Jesus tells us next.

The poor wretch threw himself at the king’s feet and begged, ‘Give me a chance and I’ll pay it all back.’ Touched by his plea, the king let him off, erasing the debt.

Remember Jesus’ prayer? Father forgive them, they do not know what they do”. So too with this man. He did not realize the impossibility of paying back what he owed. Notice at no point does the man thank the King for his forgiveness..... Even still the King erases a debt the man could never pay back.

Each of us is invited to meditate on this part of the story. Each of us is called to realize how we have sinned against the King and how in his generosity he forgives us. It is only when we ponder how in need of mercy we are that in turn we can be ever more a merciful people.

That we all stand in need of forgiveness is expressed at the beginning of every Mass when together say:

***I confess to almighty God
and to you, my brothers and sisters,
that I have greatly sinned....***

This prayer helps locate us whenever we gather for Mass. We are brothers and sisters who together have sinned in thoughts, words and deeds and are so in need of the mercy of the Father.

But we can, like the character in our story, take the Father's mercy for granted as illustrated by the merciless attitude of the one who had been forgiven so much.

Rather than reflecting the forgiving family of Jesus this man reflects the vengeful family of Cain and Lamech. How can we call God our Father in heaven, says Jesus, if in our dealing with others we do not show the family likeness? The answer is - we cannot. So, if we cannot receive mercy, and extend that mercy to others, we will be bound and imprisoned by an unforgiving and resentful heart. We will forever be in the harbour of bitterness in this life and possibly separated from mercy forever. Jesus does not want this for any of us.

Now here is the difference between this story and the story of Jesus on the Cross. On the Cross Jesus is merciful towards those who don't know they need mercy. In this story Jesus talks about extending mercy towards those who ask for forgiveness. The second is easier to do than the first. It is easier to forgive those who recognize their sin and ask to be forgiven than to forgive those who have never acknowledged their sin against us.

As Immaculee Ilibagiza illustrated in our opening story; hatred and resentment imprisoned her heart and so she took the initiative to forgive her enemies. How much more are we to forgive those in our family, be it biological or spiritual, brothers and sisters who have sinned against us?

When as disciples of Jesus we are learning this way of forgiving enemies and brothers and sisters we do discover:

"Forgiveness is a funny thing; it warms the heart and cools the sting".