

Twenty Fourth Sunday of the Year September 17, 2017

Ecclesiastics 27:30-28:7 Romans 14:7-9 Matthew 18:21-35

Forgiveness is a Christian virtue and is the hallmark of our Christian faith and practice. Forgiving the other in the full sense is a form of loving and caring. It is the miracle of a new beginning. It is to start where we are, not where we wish we were, or the other person was. It is to hold out a hand; to want to renew a friendship; to want a new relationship with husband, father, daughter, friend, or indeed enemy. It may not take away the hurt and it does not deny the past injury. It does not ignore the possibility and need for repentance and a change in the relationship. It means being willing to take the initiative in dealing with any barriers that I may be raising towards a restored relationship. It means that I am willing to have a relationship with the other person that is based on Christian love and not on what has happened in the past, if the response of the other person makes that possible. Christ from the cross showed what forgiveness is and how far we can go. The first reading from the Book of Sirach tells us that if we forgive our neighbor, we ourselves will be forgiven. In the gospel of today Jesus tells us in response to Peter's limited generosity that there is no limit to forgiveness. We are a people in need of forgiveness and we are endlessly called upon to forgive. Jesus tells us that we must be compassionate as our heavenly Father is compassionate. Summing up in the context of faith Paul tells the Church of Rome that Jesus is Lord both of the living and the dead and is the master of the Universe.

In the first reading of today Sirach tells us that we must forgive our neighbor if we want God to forgive our own sins. We must be merciful if we want to obtain mercy from God. We must not seek revenge on a neighbor of ours lest God should take vengeance on us. If we remember our end in life we will keep God's commandments and we will not be angry with our neighbor who offends us. He says it is possible only for a sinful man to be angry with his neighbor. The man who repays the neighbor in kind must expect God to do likewise to him. Only when we forgive the other person generously, then only God will forgive us. While we expect mercy and forgiveness from the infinite God whom we have offended, we often refuse a brother even a small measure of mercy and forgiveness. Hence we are told to forgive our neighbor and then our sins will be pardoned in the course of our prayer. The infinite God condescended to make a pact, a covenant with the Israelites. Because of this covenant again and again he

forgave them their sins of neglect and disloyalty. Surely a mere man must forgive a fellowman, an equal, who has offended him, if he expects God the creator who is merciful to forgive him.

In the second reading Paul reminds the Romans of the fundamental privilege which the incarnation has conferred on them. By his life and death Christ did atone for all the sins of the world. But he did something much more basic for our welfare, namely, he fulfilled God's plan for our elevation to make us his adopted sons and daughters. Thus when the Son of God took our human nature, that human nature was united with the Godhead and we became brothers in Christ. Here Paul emphasizes the fact that through our Baptism we have been made members of Christ's mystical body, we have become brothers of Christ, intimately united with him in his death and resurrection. He tells the fact that whether living or dead a Christian belongs to Christ. It was for this purpose, to unite all men closely to him, not only in this life but more specifically in the life to come, that Christ became man and made his dwelling among us. As persons who are baptized in the name of Christ we belong to him. He consoles the church that earthly death cannot separate a person from Christ and God. By his victory over death through his resurrection Christ has obtained a resurrection for the humankind. Therefore Paul insists that we are no more individual creatures but we have an eternity of life and happiness awaiting us when we die.

Jesus taught his disciples how it is necessary for them ever to be ready to forgive their fellowmen who injured them. Today's Gospel opens with one of Peter's straight forward questions, asking the Lord how often he ought to forgive. If he forgives seven times was it sufficient. According to the rabbinical tradition forgiveness apparently extends to three offences and the fourth offence calls for punishment. Good hearted Peter doubles the forgiveness of the rabbis and adds one for good measure and considers himself very generous. To his surprise Jesus is not impressed and tells him that it is not seven but seventy seven. Luke makes it further more difficult to count saying seventy times seven. In other words you may not attach a number, a limit, to the times you forgive. He then tells them a parable to bring out the lesson: unless we forgive our brother, God will not forgive us. If we take revenge on our offending brother, God will take revenge on us. We have the solemn word of Jesus that our heavenly Father will punish us if we do not forgive our brother from our heart. In the Sermon on the Mount he tells us that if our brother has done something wrong, and you are offering the

sacrifice, leave it there on the altar, go and reconcile and come to offer. Here we recall the question of Peter who said that if his brother sins against him, meaning, the personal offence committed by one member of the community against another member. It is the offence committed by a fellow believer in the context of the community. Again in a normal sense forgiveness differs from the crime. You forgive the sin but punish the crime. Blessed John Paul II forgave Agca generously and held lovingly his hand. But he did not ask the Italian Government to release him. What Jesus asks is to forgive the sin within the crime. However, Jesus does not restrict the forgiveness to members of the community and in Our Father, he extends it all.

The forgiveness that Jesus teaches originates with God and the Bible elaborates this forgiveness. This is given to us in the Book of Jonah and more specifically in today's responsorial psalm which tells us: "The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love; the Lord does not deal with us according to our sins, nor requite us according to our iniquities. As far as the East is from the West, so far does our Lord remove our transgressions from us." God's forgiving love is presented by Isaiah. When the Jews complained that God has forgotten them, the Lord replies saying, can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even if these forget, yet God will not forget his people. Look, he says, I have carved you on the palm of my hand. Thus the Bible gives us the picture of a God who is compassionate; he is a God of forgiveness. For us Christians this message comes in the compassionate love of Jesus. This is because, God loved the world so much that he gave his only son for our sake so that we may not perish but that we may have eternal life in him. The type of forgiveness involved in it is shown in the parable of the unforgiving servant.

Coming to the parable itself, we see the first servant owed the master ten thousand talents and the second servant owed the other just one hundred denarii. A talent was worth 15 years' wages for a worker and a denarius was a day's wage. The first servant would have taken 410 years to pay off the debt while the other only three months of work. The generous master forgave the debt that would have needed more than four hundred a year's of work while the second servant was put in prison for three months wages. We note here that the master in the parable is God. We humans have been forgiven a debt so enormous that we could never pay for it. It is the debt of our sins and all its consequences

like the enmity with God. To pay our debt we remember that Jesus was crucified and he expects us to forgive others the little mistakes they may have done.

We are told by Jesus in the parable to forgive others as God has forgiven us, to live the Our Father: Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. For God to forgive us means to change us and accept us into a new relationship with him. It is make our relationship alive with the life of God. It is an invitation to be one with God and become his new creation. Only God can forgive us and show us the new way in which we can live. When Bl. John Paul II forgave Mehmet Ali Agca, he did not change his heart, but God changed it. We as his followers only prepare the way for others to change. There are two remarkable benefits that come from forgiving. First benefit touches us who forgive: If you forgive others their wrong doing, the heavenly Father will also forgive us. The second benefit accrues those we forgive: we can be an instrument of God's grace to others, help to make them better than they are. Today Christ applies the lesson of the parable to his disciples telling them that if they do not forgive the other from their heart they will not receive the forgiveness from God. He clearly reminds each of us that our offence committed against God is far greater than those done to us by fellow men. Hence forgiveness has to be part and parcel of our Christian lives.

Indeed there are two different approaches to offence and forgiveness, to reconciliation. One approach is human approach where we expect the person to repent the wrong done, apologize the other for it and repair the injury. Finally receive the pardon for the same. The other is the Christian understanding of reconciliation, where we see how freely God has forgiven us and the grace of forgiveness given to us. Inspired by the divine forgiveness, we repent and also extend the forgiveness to the other. Here reconciliation does not begin with the offender but with the victim. God will forgive the soul that forgives others. God will welcome the return of such a child into the Body of Christ to continue its sanctification. The Holy Spirit will once more dwell within the body of the repentant individual. God will bless the person with numerous graces, this being God's way of rejoicing in this great moment. God rejoices more for the one soul that is saved than for the ninety nine that were not in need of being saved.

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant raises the frightening prospect that pardon already granted by God could be revoked. The king who forgave his servant his

debt meant it. But when the servant went out and failed to forgive his fellow servant, the king revoked the pardon. By his action the servant had shown that he did not appreciate and therefore was unworthy of the pardon given to him. Is this a good analogy of how God deals with us? That seems to be the point of the parable. Jesus tells us that his heavenly Father will also do to every one of them, if they do not forgive their brother or sister from their heart. In other words, when God gives us His word of forgiveness, everything is not over yet. The deal is finally concluded only when we are able to go out and forgive those who sin against us. The free grace of God's forgiveness needs our response of forgiving our neighbour to be finally ratified. This is indeed a frightening thought. Hence the first reading tells us to forgive our neighbours the wrong they have done, and then our sins will be pardoned when we pray. We find it hard to forgive others even though that is the only way to anchor God's forgiveness because we fail to appreciate and celebrate our own forgiveness like the ungrateful servant in the parable. We tend to focus on the little things our neighbour owes us rather than the larger amounts we owe to God, which God has graciously chosen to forgive.

There are two very clear messages from both the parable and the words from the Sermon on the Mount: The first is that we dare not hold back forgiveness from those God forgives. We know from the Gospel, God's attitude towards wrong doers and his penchant for forgiveness. But the second message is that the divine patience is not infinite. God, as Jesus tells us to do, is ready to forgive 77 times. And, when it comes to the forgiveness of our own sins, we take this for granted. At the same time, there is a limit to the extent of God's forgiveness in the sense that it is conditional. That condition is determined first, by our readiness to respond to his forgiveness through our repentance and conversion, and second, by our willingness to imitate him in practicing forgiveness of those we feel have offended or hurt us. Forgiving in the full Christian sense is a form of loving and caring. Today are told to forgive others and our forgiveness should not be just once or twice, but seventy times seven. This means that it is an ongoing forgiveness, day after day, week after week, years after years, this being done without counting. When we do not forgive someone, it is because we are passing judgment on that person. Jesus commanded us not to judge others so that we will not be judged.

Once upon a time two brothers, who lived on adjoining farms, fell into conflict. It was the first serious rift in 40 years of farming side by side, sharing machinery,

and trading labour and goods as needed without a conflict. Then the long collaboration fell apart. It began with a small misunderstanding and it grew into a major difference, and finally it exploded into an exchange of bitter words followed by weeks of silence. One morning there was a knock on John's door. He opened it to find a man with a carpenter's tool box. "I'm looking for a few days' work" he said. "Perhaps you would have a few small jobs here and there I could help with? Could I help you?" "Yes," said the older brother. "I do have a job for you." "Look across the creek at that farm. That's my neighbor; in fact, it's my younger brother. Last week there was a meadow between us and he took his bulldozer to the river level and now there is a creek between us. Well, he may have done this to spite me, but I'll do him one better. See that pile of lumber by the barn? I want you to build me a fence --an 8-foot fence -- so I won't need to see his place or his face anymore." The carpenter said, "I think I understand the situation. Show me the nails and the post-hole digger and I'll be able to do a job that pleases you." The older brother had to go to town, so he helped the carpenter get the materials ready and then he was off for the day. The carpenter worked hard all that day measuring, sawing, nailing. About sunset when the farmer returned, the carpenter had just finished his job. The farmer's eyes opened wide, his jaw dropped. There was no fence there at all. It was a bridge -- a bridge stretching from one side of the creek to the other! A fine piece of work, handrails and all -- and the neighbor, his younger brother was coming toward them, his hand outstretched. "You are quite a fellow to build this bridge after all I've said and done." The two brothers stood at each end of the bridge, and then they met in the middle, taking each other's hand. They turned to see the carpenter hoist his toolbox onto his shoulder. "No, wait! Stay a few days. I've a lot of other projects for you," said the older brother. "I'd love to stay on," the carpenter said, but I have many more bridges to build.

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