



Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time August 9, 2015 B

A depressed prophet is renewed. Paul tells us to “put aside grudges and slander.”

Reflecting on our first reading today, Fr. Flor McCarthy writes:

In the first reading of today’s Mass we met the man who is generally regarded to be the greatest of all the Old Testament prophets—Elijah. But we meet him here when he is in the depths of despair. A wicked queen (Jezebel) is hunting him down to kill him. So what does he do? He flees into the desert. There a terrible anguish comes over him. He feels he has taken all he can take. He just wants to die so he asks God to take his life away. But instead of doing that, God sends an angel to him with food and water. Strengthened by these the prophet arises and makes his way to the mountain of God (Horeb). There he encounters God and is enabled to resume his mission.

Who was this kind angel who saved his life? I believe it was a human “angel.” More than likely, the prophet’s own servant whom he had left a short distance away, a kind of “human” angel that may have helped us to get up after we have been knocked down.

In some ways it is a consolation for us to think that a great man of God like Elijah could feel like that. That he could be down, broken, and crushed. Many people go through a period like that. It is only the care of some human angel that helps them go through it. This is the normal way in which God’s care is mediated to us. We too may get the glorious privilege of being that kind of ministering angel to someone in despair. By our love we can help them pull through it, through small acts, insignificant in themselves.

Ultimately, the “angel” God sent to us is none other than his Son, Jesus. It is he who stays by our side when we are down and crushed and unable to carry on. He gives us, not ordinary bread, but the “bread of life.” In the strength of this bread he will walk all the way to the Mountain of God, namely, eternal life.

How much do we trust him? How much do we hunger for the bread only he can give?

Fr. McCarthy adds the following reflection:

*Like a fruit tree we all know our seasons.
In spring the tree is full of buds and blossoms.*

*So at times our lives are full
of hope and promise.*

*In summer the tree is full of leaves.
Our lives at times are like that.
They are full of joy and contentment.*

*In autumn the tree becomes a feast of color
and is full of ripe fruit.*

*At times our lives are like that—
full of meaning and achievement.*

It is in the winter moments of our lives that we need to be alert and vigilant for the “human” angels that God will most surely send into our lives.

“Put aside grudges, slander and name-calling” and “forgive readily.”

In today’s second reading, Paul urges us to put aside grudges, slander, name-calling and to forgive readily.

Fr. Denis McBride, C.S.S.R., offers the following reflection on today’s second reading. He begins with a story about delayed forgiveness.

Frederick William I, King of Prussia, ruled severely as monarch from 1713 until 1740. He created a powerfully centralized government, in every department of which he scrutinized operations and exercised the final power of decision. He became deeply disappointed in his son, the future Frederick the Great, who was more interested in culture and music than military superiority. The father’s disaffection turned to hatred, and his treatment became so harsh that the young prince decided to run away. But he and his accomplice were caught and faced a court martial. The prince was

sentenced to solitary confinement; his accomplice to life imprisonment. King Frederick decided that the sentence of life imprisonment was too lenient; he had the accomplice beheaded in the presence of his son. This drastic measure had the desired effect: the prince asked the king's pardon and applied himself to military studies.

When the king was on his deathbed, the attending priest warned him that if he wished to go to heaven he would have to forgive all his enemies. The king's thoughts turned to his favorite enemy, George II of England. "In that case," he told his wife reluctantly "write to your brother and tell him that I forgive him. But be sure not to do it until I am dead."

Being well dead is a little late for forgiveness. A message of forgiveness telegraphed from the cemetery is a classic case of too little too late. But the image does summarize what we find ourselves doing too often: hoarding hurt, watching over our aging grudges as if they were valuable antiques. So it is that forgiveness gets delayed. Sometimes we delay so long that we are left standing at a graveside quietly whispering forgiveness to a lowered coffin, wishing we had found enough courage to speak our peace long before the ritual farewell.

Forgiving readily

We rarely think of a God who gets depressed at our hardened attitudes, a God whose good mood changes to sadness when he sees how greedy we are with the forgiveness he offers so generously. In today's second reading, Paul tells us how not to grieve the Holy Spirit of God:

"Never have grudges against others, or lose your temper, or raise your voice to anyone, or call each other names, or allow any sort of spitefulness. Be friends with one another, and kind, forgiving each other as readily as God forgave you in Christ."

Paul was the one who had grieved the Holy Spirit. He was the man who persecuted Christ by hunting down the disciples with military precision and determination, chasing them into foreign cities, arranging their trials and attending their executions. Paul was committed to the violent oppression of the infant Christian community until he was confronted with a large paradox—the forgiveness of the one he was

persecuting. The persecuted Christ forgave him readily. That experience overwhelmed Paul; it turned his life around; it gave him a sense of his own worth stronger than the sense of his own sin; it committed him to sharing the forgiveness he had received from Christ.

Paul hoped that other Christians could come to the same truth that he had experienced. The hurt God who forgave Paul did not delight in Paul's wrongdoing nor fasten onto his wrongdoing. Like the Father in the parable of the prodigal son, God's forgiveness does not reduce the wrongdoer to a servant but reaffirms his worth as a son. This is appreciative grace. Paul saw how Christ moved beyond his sins and called him to new possibilities. That delighted Paul. He appreciated it so much that he started doing the same himself. He hoped that forgiveness would catch on.

Becoming good at forgiveness

We know from our experience that there is a kind of forgiveness which is used as a putdown to humiliate others, which exploits people's shame, which dotes on their past wrongs. This kind of forgiveness is a new sin. The forgiveness Paul writes about is a reflection of God's forgiveness: it is readily given, it is not begrudged, it is offered freely.

Paul has a deeply held belief that if we keep God's forgiveness in Christ before us, that saving image will always help to shape our forgiveness. If the forgiving Christ stands before us, it becomes more difficult to refuse forgiveness to those who have hurt us.

Our faith tells us that God has made an eternal habit of forgiveness; he is a professional forgiver, not least because he has so much practice. The only way we can become accomplished forgivers is to forgive readily. Practice makes perfect. When we forgive readily, we don't hoard hurt and grudges, we don't assemble a junk room of spitefulness. Not only does that keep our lives uncluttered, it is also a sure way of cheering up the Holy Spirit of God.

[Used with permission granted by Denis McBride, C.S.S.R., Seasons of the Word.]

Have a blessed week,

