



## Seventh Sunday Ordinary Time February 19, 2017 A

### Loving our enemies is not easy but essential for our spiritual, emotional and physical health.

A lot can be said about this week's Gospel which tells us to love our enemies. Fr. Flor McCarthy offers many helpful reflections on this Sunday's Gospel.

#### Scripture note

*Since God is holy, we are to be holy. We are holy when we imitate the generosity of God by not exacting vengeance, or bearing a grudge against another. In Leviticus, (today's first reading) the commandment: 'You must love your neighbor as yourself' is restricted to fellow-Israelites. But Jesus broadened it to include everyone, Gentiles as well as Jews, enemies as well as friends. Why? Because this shows the way the heavenly Father acts. He sows equal love towards good and bad, not because he is indifferent to morality, but because he loves without limit.*

*Paul in today's second reading, gives us a profound reason why we should respect one another: we are the Temple of God. Individually and collectively, the Holy Spirit dwells in us. This is also the basis of our unity.*

#### A better way

*When Jesus says, 'Offer the wicked man no resistance,' he is not telling us to be passive in the face of physical danger or abuse. He is rejecting retaliation of any kind. We are not allowed to have hatred in our hearts for anything, even our enemies.*

*Hatred is a very dangerous thing. It must be handled with great respect. It should be kept for a cause such as intolerance or injustice, not for an individual. This was the key to the success of Nelson Mandela.*

*Mandela spent over twenty-seven years in South African prisons. When he was finally released, he had every reason to feel bitter, and to come out vowing to get revenge on those who unjustly deprived him of his freedom. Instead, he came out smiling, and seeking reconciliation with the leaders of the regime that had put him in prison. Thus he became the cornerstone of a new South Africa. If he had harboured bitterness, who knows what would have happened?*

*In his autobiography, Long Walk to Freedom (1994), he tells us:*

*I knew that people expected me to harbor anger against whites. But I had none. In prison, my*

*anger towards whites decreased but my hatred for the system grew. I wanted South Africa to see that I loved even my enemies while I hated the system that turned us against one another. I saw my mission as one of preaching reconciliation, of healing the old wounds and building a new South Africa.*

#### Hatred is like poison

*Hate poisons the heart; love purifies it. Jesus says to us, 'Love your enemies.' It is not only for the sake of the enemy that he says this but for our sake too, and because love is more beautiful than hate. The greatest gift we possess is the gift to love. There is one thing that can utterly destroy this gift, and that is hatred.*

*Two farmers, John and James, were good friends until a dispute arose between them over a piece of land. Unable to settle the issue among themselves, they went to court over it. The court decided in favour of John. James was bitter and put poison in John's well, not a fatal dose, but enough to give it an obnoxious taste.*

*John was very angry. His neighbours heard about it. Some refused to get involved. But others were supportive and declared that James should be made to pay for what he had done.*

*John was about to go by night and poison James' well when a stranger arrived at his house. On hearing the story the stranger agreed that it was a pretty nasty situation, but he wouldn't agree with retaliation. 'Poison is not a thing to play around with,' he declared. 'I've a better idea. I'll show you in the morning.'*

*His idea was to clean out the well. He offered to help. Reluctantly John agreed. It was a messy business and took them two whole days. Then they ran the fresh water through the well several times. Finally, the stranger took a cup of the water, drank it, and declared that it was clean. John also drank from the well, but insisted that he could still taste the poison. To which the stranger replied,*

*'Take it from me, the water is perfect. But you will continue to taste the poison until you do one more thing.'*

*'What's that?' asked John earnestly.*

*'You must forgive your neighbor. You have got rid of the poison from the well, but not the poison that lodges in your mind and heart. Not until you let go of your*

*bitterness, and forgive your brother, will the water taste right.'*

*That evening John went over to his neighbor and made peace with him. When he came back he tasted the water again. This time it tasted good.*

*Hatred is a very dangerous thing. It can destroy us. We consume more energy in hating than in all our other activities. It creates a legacy of bitterness, hostility, and resentment. Christ's way is a better way. It is not a soft way. It's a hard way that calls for great strength and toughness. The person who is truly non-violent, who is incapable of violence, is the person who is fearless.*

*Chesterton said, 'Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found hard and left untried.' More than any other, the exhortation to love one's enemies has been left untried.*

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The following are some excerpts from my book *How to Forgive Yourself and Others*.

### **Defining forgiveness: What it is and isn't**

Having a clear sense of what forgiveness is and isn't can be a big help as we face this difficult task. Let's first name some of the things that forgiveness is *not*.

- Forgiveness does not necessarily mean that we must forget a hurt or injustice. We often hear the advice "forgive and forget." Sometimes it is not possible to forget some hurts and sometimes it is not even wise to do so. Some hurts and injustices are too big and painful to remove totally from our memory. What we can and should seek to do is to let go of the resentments connected with the hurt. If we don't, these resentments will continue to wound *us*, cloud the way we see reality and control our actions. Also, while we may sometimes be able to totally forget some hurts, it is not necessarily wise to forget *all* hurts. We may need to remember some hurts to help us not to allow them to happen again. For example, if we do not remember how a person abused us, we run the risk of allowing such behavior to occur again. Also, remembering hurts that are forgiven and healed will enable us to offer understanding, compassion and help to others in need of healing.
- Forgiveness doesn't mean that we surrender our right to justice. For example, if we know someone has cheated us of a lot of money, forgiveness doesn't mean that we surrender our right to seek justice. The late Pope John Paul II forgave Ali Agca, the man who tried to kill him, but he didn't request that he be released from jail. Forgiving someone who breaks our trust doesn't mean that we give him back his job. I sometimes say to people,

we shouldn't confuse forgiveness with stupidity. Jesus did indeed ask us to forgive, but he didn't ask us to be stupid in our dealings with others.

- Forgiveness does not necessarily mean that I have to relate to or befriend my offender. This is especially true if my offender shows no sorrow or remorse for the wrong he/she did. Of course, some situations may demand that we try to relate well to our offender, e.g., a married couple or friend whom we desire to continue to have a relationship with. It is also very desirable that divorced parents who have children, especially young children, get along for the sake of the children. Also, it is desirable that co-workers and parishioners get along for the sake of the community. But the good news is that we can love and forgive someone without befriending him/her.

- Forgiveness doesn't mean that I have to put up with intolerable behavior. If a spouse or anyone else verbally abuses us on a regular or semi-regular basis, we should do everything in our power to resist such behavior. Forgiveness does not ask that we become doormats for nasty people. Both Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King taught their followers to resist those who did them wrong.

- Forgiveness doesn't mean *excusing, condoning or minimizing* the wrong inflicted on us. Jesus never suggested that we do any of the above. He only asks that we forgive.

- Forgiveness doesn't mean that we never have negative feelings towards our offender. There is a difference between the *forgiveness* of a hurt and the *total* healing of a hurt.

- Forgiveness does not mean that we have to *like* our offender. I doubt Jesus liked the Pharisees, yet I assume he forgave them their offenses against him.

### **What is forgiveness?**

- Forgiveness is a *process* (which may take a day, a year or a lifetime) during which we seek to eliminate from mind and heart all resentment and hurt feelings that we have because of what someone did or said to us.
- Forgiveness is the spiritual surgery that we perform on ourselves (with the help of God's grace), to free ourselves from all the venom we feel as the result of a hurt or injustice.
- Forgiveness is a gift we give ourselves so that we do not remain stuck in the past and in our pain – living as victims of some big hurt or injustice. When we are able to forgive, we move from being the victim of our story to being the hero of it.

- “Forgiveness is the powerful assertion that bad things will not ruin your today even though they may have spoiled your past.” (Jean Maalouf)

We know that forgiveness is occurring or has occurred when the distance between our offender and us is a “peaceful distance” and not a “hostile one.” We know that forgiveness is occurring when we can pray for our offender, wish him/her well and let go of all desire to get even.

### Three good reasons to forgive

**Reason #1: God’s word tells us to do so, not once but many times. Jesus died forgiving his executioners.**

**Reason #2: To free our hearts from the destructive power of unforgiveness.**

In his excellent little book, *The Healing Power of Forgiveness*, Jean Maalouf has an amazing piece on the importance of forgiveness for our whole wellbeing. He writes:

*The benefits of forgiveness have been presented by numerous studies on forgiveness. These studies were conducted in the fields of psychology, medicine, social science, and religion, and they concur in establishing the importance of positive emotions: gratitude, faith, love, forgiveness, hope, caring, and so on. According to these studies, such emotions and virtues have a definite impact on our cardiovascular functioning in particular, and our well-being in general ....*

*Indeed, people who practice forgiveness report fewer health problems, feel better psychologically and emotionally, have less stress, and increase the efficient response of their immune system.*

*On the other hand, it has also been proven that bitterness, resentment, and anger can be a fertile soil for malignant growths. I read a story about a woman with breast cancer who visited a spiritual counselor. This woman was suffering for some time because she had undergone several operations while the cancer was spreading throughout her system. The counselor advised her to spend some time alone every day, to meditate, and to forgive everybody and everything. So she did. Among many different lines she read and meditated on, one particularly drew her attention, when St. Paul recommended to “put on the breastplate of faith and love” (1Thess 5:8). This line inspired her prayer: Christ is healing me. I put on the breastplate of faith and love and forgiveness and righteousness. I cast all my burdens of injury, hurt, resentment, and bitterness on Christ who is my Savior and who sets me free. I am free of every illness. I am healthy. Thank you, God.*

*For several days, she prayed this way with a heart full of love, hope, and determination. Subsequently, to the*

*astonishment of her doctor, the lump in her breast disappeared and she was completely healed.*

*This story is one of many similar stories that can be found in the medical records to prove that forgiveness and love have the power to dissolve gallstones, cancers, tumors, and other similar diseases. What the medical records tell us is that, when we are in a state of unforgiveness, our bodies start to manufacture extra chemicals – like adrenaline, adrenocorticotrophic hormone, and cortisone – that build up in the bloodstream. If a situation like this continues for a while unchecked, gastric ulcers and other serious illnesses can result.*

*Bitter thoughts make bitter cells. Better thoughts make better cells. Forgiving and loving thoughts create healing cells.* (Twenty-Third Publications)

To choose not to enter into the forgiveness process is to choose to give our offender ongoing control over our emotional, spiritual and physical life. Does that seem smart? I don’t think so. Yet, that is exactly what we are doing when we choose not to enter into the difficult process of forgiveness. Just think about it, our offender may have moved forward with his/her life, but he/she continues to control us and keep us miserable. Refusing to enter into the forgiveness process is a choice to inflict a continuous wound on ourselves. It is like refusing to deal with a cancerous wound in our bodies. In his book *10 Secrets for Success and Inner Peace*, Wayne Dyer writes: “Resentment is like venom that continues to pour through your system, doing it poisonous damage long after being bitten by a snake. It’s not the bite that kills you; it’s the venom.” Thousands of year ago, Confucius said: “Those who cannot forgive others break the bridge over which they themselves must pass.”

**Reason #3: When we forgive, we make our world less violent and more loving.**

When we deliberately hold onto grudges and resentments, we are adding darkness to an already dark world. But when we decide to do the hard work of forgiveness, we are choosing to overcome the darkness of unforgiveness with love.

### What the rest of my book on forgiveness covers

- *Thirteen truths to remember about the forgiveness process, e.g., before we can forgive a hurt, we must first name it, own it, and give some expressions to it.*
- *Ten obstacles to forgiving life’s hurts.*
- *Five prayer suggestions that can help us forgive a hurt.*

For example:

*Jesus, you know the way I feel about N.\_\_\_\_. You know my lack of desire to forgive. You know that all I want to do is to get even with him. But, I also know that holding onto a hardened unforgiving heart is no good for my body, mind*

*or spirit. It hurts me more than it hurts my offender. It also hurts my relationship with you.*

*Jesus, I admit my helplessness and powerlessness when it comes to even thinking about forgiving N.\_\_\_\_. But, I also know that all things are possible for those who cooperate with your grace. With St. Paul, I believe that I can do all things in you who strengthens me. Empower me, Jesus, to do this work of forgiveness. Place within my heart the desire to forgive N\_\_\_\_. I find it so hard to even make that request because my heart has so much venom towards N\_\_\_\_. But I make the request, however feebly, hoping that you will give me the grace to do what I am powerless to do for myself.*

Sometimes we will need to say that prayer fervently *many* times before we will notice any desire to work through hurt and anger. Just as physical therapy takes time, so it is with *spiritual therapy*.

- *Forgiving a deceased person*
- *Forgiving God.* While it is indeed true to say that God and his ways are perfect, it is also true to say that his ways may also deeply hurt us and cause us to distance ourselves from him.
- *Forgiving religious and secular institutions*
- *Steps towards self-forgiveness*
- *Responses to three difficult questions, e.g., What can we do when the hurt or wrong is ongoing, for example, when a spouse or employer continues to be abusive.*

Have a blessed week,

*Le Sarah*