



## Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time A September 13, 2020

### The experience and remembrance of God's mercy should enable us to forgive others.

In today's Gospel, Jesus underlines the importance of forgiveness in the life of a disciple.

As we know, Jesus not only *preaches* forgiveness but *practices* it in a dramatic way as he hangs upon his cross. He asks his Father to forgive his executioners saying: "They do not know what they are doing." He also shows God's mercy to the criminal dying beside him.

In today's Gospel, Peter wonders, as we might, how often one should forgive someone who has hurt us. He wonders if seven times would be enough. Most of us might say seven times is plenty, if not too much. In asking if seven times might be enough, Peter is seeking to place a *limit* on the amount of times disciples should forgive. But Jesus says that disciples should place no limit when it comes to forgiveness. In saying a disciple should forgive 'seventy times seven,' Jesus is saying that disciples of his must place no cap on forgiveness.

To drive home his point, Jesus tells the story of the unforgiving debtor. It is the story of a man who has been forgiven a huge debt by his master. But the same man goes on to show *no mercy* to someone who owes him a much smaller debt.

#### Remembering God's mercy towards us

Commenting on today's Gospel, Fr. Denis McBride, CSsR, reckons that the unforgiving debtor suffered from a loss of memory and is hence condemned.

*Forgetfulness of our own sins can lead to a lack of compassion. Remembering how our own sins have gone unpunished by God should lead us to forgive others. Through forgetfulness of God's compassion, we can end up becoming cruel to each other. That is why at the beginning of each Eucharist we are invited to be mindful of our own sins.*

The above insight was new to me, at least the way it was stated. The debtor in the Gospel was strongly condemned because he had *forgotten* how wonderfully generous his master was to him. If he was fully in touch with the mercy he had received, we can assume that he would be only too happy to forgive a much smaller

debt. One wonders if the reason we are so slow or downright opposed to forgiving another is because we have forgotten how merciful God is to us. A strong sense of God's mercy towards us should transform us so much so that we would be greatly motivated to pass this mercy on to those who have hurt us.

Jesus is saying to us that if God forgives us *over and over*, we, his children, must seek to follow his example. None of us would make it to heaven if God placed limits on how often he forgave us. Imagine God saying to us: "I am done with you. I have forgiven you a hundred times and you keep offending me." Yet, isn't this what we do or tend to do with our offender?

#### Forgiveness is divine. It does not come naturally to us.

Forgiveness goes against our natural instincts. When someone hurts us, we want to hurt them back. We don't want to deal with them. But we must. It is part of being a Christian. In fact, all major religions place a high emphasis on forgiveness.

Gandhi knew how difficult it was to forgive when he said: "*Forgiveness is the virtue of the brave.*" The poet Alexander Pope famously said: "*To err is human. To forgive is divine.*"

The *divine* nature of forgiveness is brought home in inspiring stories of forgiveness. In her excellent book *Traits of a Healthy Spirituality*, Sr. Melanie Svoboda SND tells the following story.

*A woman learned that her twenty-four-year-old daughter had been murdered. For several years she was consumed with hatred for the murderer. At the same time, she felt tremendously guilty for her hatred. Over the years she prayed to God about her lack of forgiveness and even made several retreats. At one point her minister asked if she could at least pray that God would forgive the murderer. Three years after her daughter's death, she was finally able to do that. But it wasn't until ten years later that the woman was finally able to forgive her daughter's murderer. Forgiveness became possible for this woman because she prayed to God and she sought the help of other people—over time.* (p.96)

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In my book, *How to Forgive Yourself & Others*, I cite several other inspiring examples of forgiveness. Here are two of them:

*When the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was set up in South Africa to heal the hurts of decades of apartheid and human abuses, an American couple, Peter and Linda Biehl, went to South Africa to meet and embrace the people who killed their twenty-six year-old daughter.*

*After spending twenty-seven years in jail for plotting against South Africa's apartheid government, Nelson Mandela said: "As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I'd still be in prison."*

### **Three reasons why doing the hard work of forgiveness is important to our body, mind and soul**

**Reason #1.** God expects us to forgive, as stated in today's first reading from Sirach: "*Should you not have pity on your fellow servant, as I have pity on you?*"

**Reason #2.** To free our hearts from the destructive power of unforgiveness. Holding onto the resentment and bitterness connected with unforgiveness is destructive to our body, mind and spirit. In my book on forgiveness, I quote Wayne Dyer as saying: "*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.*"

**Reason #3.** When we forgive, we make the world a more peaceful and less violent place. We must remember the words of St. Francis: "Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with *me*."

### **What forgiveness isn't and is**

In my book, I name seven things forgiveness is *not*. For example, forgiveness does not mean letting go of our right to seek justice.

I name three things that forgiveness *is*. The third states that 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.

I quote Jean Maalouf as saying: "*Forgiveness is the powerful assertion that bad things will not ruin your today even though they may have spoiled your past.*"

### **Asking for forgiveness**

Asking for forgiveness can be more difficult than *giving* forgiveness. When we are the one offering forgiveness,

we are in a position of strength. But when we are the one *asking* for forgiveness, we are operating from a place of weakness, poverty, and need. An infallible sign of the virtue of humility (often called the *foundation* virtue of the spiritual life) is our readiness to ask for forgiveness. On the other hand, the sin of pride is what usually blocks us from asking for forgiveness.

### **Forgiving self**

For some people, forgiveness of self can be a huge issue—more difficult than forgiving others. We can see why this would be if, through carelessness, someone was badly physically hurt. Or, perhaps, through preoccupation with material gain, a marriage falls apart and children are neglected. Probably all of us would agree that there are some things we may have a very hard time forgiving ourselves of. When we have failed in some serious way and we are truly sorry, we must remember God *does* forgive and that *he wants us* to forgive ourselves. What might help us to forgive ourselves is doing some outreach work connected directly or indirectly with our transgression. Some women who have had an abortion often become involved in pro-life activities. People who went to prison for drug crimes often love to speak to young people about the dangers of drugs.

After giving absolution to someone who has confessed a sin that he/she has a hard time forgiving him/herself for, I often say: "Today, Jesus forgives you this sin because you are truly sorry for it. When you find yourself having a problem forgiving yourself, say: '*Jesus, you know I'm truly sorry for this sin. I accept your mercy.*' Now, Satan, get out of her!"

Only Satan wants us to not forgive ourselves for past sins and failures. He wants us to be filled with guilt and self-loathing. Jesus wants us to be free of the burdens of past failures. Please remember that.

### **Ten obstacles to forgiving life's hurts**

We may wonder why some good people cannot even get started with the forgiveness process. What blocks them or us from getting started?

Psychologists tell us that obstacles to forgiving a hurt are often unconscious. Hence, the importance of naming a variety of obstacles that may be hindering us as we move through the forgiveness process. If, at this time, you are trying to forgive a hurt or wrong done to you, you can see if any of the following obstacles are present in your life.

**1.** Because of life's experiences, we may not be very forgiving. We may have been hurt a lot when we were young or during our adult years. These experiences may

have left us wounded or weakened in this area. We may have little experience of forgiveness. We may, in fact, have failed to actually accept forgiveness when offered. As a result, we may have little forgiveness to offer to others. But, then again, through a miracle of grace, people who have had little forgiveness in their lives are able to forgive huge hurts.

2. We may feel strongly that our offender does not deserve our forgiveness. But, eventually, we must ask: Do *we* deserve the forgiveness of others? But, more importantly, do we deserve *God's* mercy for our many offenses against him? And let us not forget that even though we may believe that our offender does not deserve our forgiveness, we deserve to be free of all the resentment, pain, and stress that steal our joy because of a particular hurt.

3. Intellectually, we may feel consciously or unconsciously that Jesus is wrong on this issue. (I think many do.) We may feel some things should not be forgiven, such as acts of terrorism or some terrible wrong done to us.

4. Pride is a big obstacle for many people. Some of us may not be humble enough to get down on our knees and beg God to help us to do something that we may have absolutely no desire to do. Pride may also prevent us from accepting the sincere apologies of our offender.

5. Forgiving a hurt may seem like we are *minimizing* or *excusing* a hurt. It may seem like an act of weakness. Macho people do not like to come across as weak in any way. If we think forgiveness is an act of weakness, we should consider what Mahatma Gandhi once said: "The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is an attribute of the strong."

6. Forgiveness involves facing *emotions* that most of us do not like to face and deal with, namely, anger, our need for revenge, hatred, our need to get even. If our tendency is to ignore our feelings, we are most likely going to have a very difficult time facing and dealing with tough feelings like anger, hatred and revenge. We may not even want to admit that we have such feelings, let alone deal with them. If facing our feelings is an issue for us, remember that feelings are neither right nor wrong. Also remember that Jesus, being *fully human*, experienced every human feeling.

7. We may fear that forgiveness would only leave us open to being hurt again. If we forgive our offender, he/she may interpret our mercy as weakness and hurt us again.

8. We may not even want to talk to God about the issue because we do not want to hear him say: "Forgive" or "Let go." As a result, we may even keep God at a

distance. Of course such a decision negatively impacts our *whole* relationship with him.

9. We may not be able to get beyond the anger and rage we feel related to the hurt. All we may be able to think about is how we can 'get even' with our offender. Of course it's okay to be angry—we just need to decide *how long* we need to be angry: a year, 10 years, 20 years? Deciding to keep our anger alive is a decision to allow our offender to continue to control our emotions for years, or maybe for a lifetime. Do we really want to give our offender that much control and power over our lives emotionally and spiritually? Finally, we may feel (and this is nearly always unconscious) that our anger is all we have left when it comes to a particular relationship. If we let go of the anger, we may feel diminished, empty and very powerless. Of course, our anger may be 'righteous anger' – the type Jesus showed when he cleansed the Temple (John 2:13-17) and the anger that drove Dr. Martin Luther King and Mothers Against Drunk Drivers to fight injustice. The anger we need to move past is the anger that makes us bitter and keeps us in a bad place emotionally and spiritually.

10. We may adopt what I call a "righteous victim stance." We may believe that all the blame and wrong are with our offender. This may be the situation sometimes (e.g., child abuse cases), but it is not always the case. Sometimes we are so preoccupied with pointing out the splinter in our brother's eye that we cannot see the wooden beam in our own eye (Matt 7:1-5). When we are clearly in touch with our own sinfulness and our need for God's mercy, we will, most likely, find it easier to show mercy to those who have hurt us. On the other hand, if we suffer from the spiritual disease of self-righteousness, we will, most likely, be more resistant to forgiving others.

### Cute Story

Two neighbors had a lifelong quarrel. One of them became gravely ill. His wife called the priest and explained to him, "Father, Pat has been fighting with Mike for years. Pat is going to die. Can't you patch up their quarrel?" After much persuasion, the priest induced the dying Pat to call in Mike for a reconciliation. In a few minutes, Mike was at the bedside. He suggested, "Let us make up, Pat. Let bygones be bygones." Pat agreed rather reluctantly. Mike prepared to leave. As he approached the door, Pat raised himself on one elbow in bed and shaking his other fist at Mike, he shouted, "Remember, Mike, this only counts in case I die!"

## Some other things I deal with in my book

Former Fox newscaster Bill O'Reilly used to like to say, "I'm a practical man." He would say that when he wanted someone to be concrete about a particular issue. I like to think that both my forgiveness book and prayer book are very practical books. I don't just write about the importance of forgiveness and prayer, I offer lots of practical tips when it comes to approaching both topics. Above you can get a little taste of my efforts to be practical or concrete. The following are more examples of what I deal with in my book, *How to Forgive Yourself & Others*.

- ◆ Thirteen Truths to Remember about the Forgiveness Process
- ◆ Five Prayer Suggestions
- ◆ Forgiving a Deceased Loved One
- ◆ Forgiving God
- ◆ Forgiving Religious and Secular Institutions
- ◆ Forgiving Self
- ◆ Three difficult questions, e.g., What can we do when a hurt or wrong is ongoing, as in a case where a spouse or employer continues to be abusive?

Regarding my book, Fr. Richard Rohr, OFM, writes:

*The chemistry and grace of the "mystery" of forgiveness deserves this kind of full treatment. If this wisdom could be heard, we would have a very different and wonderful world. Leave this book on coffee tables and in doctors' offices!*

Have a blessed week,

