

15 Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A February 23, 2020
Leviticus 19:1-2,17-18 Psalm 103 1Corinthians 3:16-23 Matthew 5:38-48

In Matthew's Gospel today, Jesus says, "*Love your enemies ... do good to those who hate you ... Bless those who curse you ...*" To say that we should love our enemies and do good to those who hate us has always been the most difficult part of the Gospel message.

We can love our neighbour. We can love the disadvantaged. But to love and forgive our enemy, the one who has intentionally harmed us, is very difficult to do. And who is this enemy? Maybe it is someone you do not get along with in your workplace, or someone in your family, or someone in your community, or perhaps it's a friend. Maybe it is from the result of a tragic event that happened that changed your life forever. Forgiving our enemies has never been a popular commandment but it is crucial for our spiritual health.

At the time of Jesus, the enemy was simply black and white. My enemy hates me; I hate my enemy. In the Gospel, Jesus is calling His Apostles, and calling us also, to live by a new set of values. Jesus' words sound, at first, like a description of weakness but, Jesus is really describing a person of spiritual maturity.

We know that to forgive someone is often not easy to do. Yet, Jesus calls on us to forgive one another as God the Father has forgiven each one of us. Jesus teaches His Apostles to pray the words of the *Our Father*. In the prayer, we ask God to forgive us as we forgive others. If we cannot forgive others, then we cannot ask God to forgive us. Jesus says, "if you forgive others their transgressions, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive you" (Matthew 6:14).

We may know people who refuse to forgive and that refusal enables a hurt of long ago to control and dominate their lives. We may know people who get so trapped by their hate of someone, even those who may have died, that they allow that person to shape their lives. We may know people who are filled with resentments. They constantly replay the past, like a personal *history channel* of resentments where *the past comes alive* as they go over and over what happened years ago. They do not hold a grudge. A grudge holds them!

The moment we start hating or not being able to forgive a person, we become his or her slave. That person is inserted into your thoughts. We, in effect, take that person with us wherever we go. That person becomes a burden on our spiritual life. By our hatred or not being able to forgive, we give that person much more power than he or she ever would have had on their own.

Holding on to a grievance will often keep a person imprisoned in emotional turmoil, depression, withdrawal, physical sickness, and unable to enjoy the present moment, but being able to let go will set the person free. Jesus provided the key to forgiveness when He forgave those who crucified Him. *“Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing.”*

Forgiveness is not easy. It takes time, But, forgiveness begins with *wanting* to forgive. We may have hurts from the past. Nursing grudges, harbouring resentments, clinging to the wrongs others have done will only burden us, diminish us and weaken us. We have to ask for the grace of God, the grace for the power to forgive.

Forgiveness is about removing the barriers which block the flow of love. Forgiveness is a sign of strength, as liberation, and as grace, which will give us freedom. Forgiveness is a gift you give to yourself. God calls us to forgive even those who don't deserve it. How many times do we forgive? Jesus says, *“Seventy times seven!”* (Matthew 18:22). If we refuse to forgive others, we do not really harm them but we continue to hurt ourselves.

When we are ready to reconcile, if we sincerely ask for the power to forgive, God's power will arrive. Forgiveness is a grace that is ours for the asking as long as that asking is sincere. Because this grace is available to us, we human beings are capable of forgiving more than is humanly possible.

How can we hear the commands of Jesus to forgive, to not condemn or hate or judge, and to love, yet not feel burdened? Our hearts may say yes to every one of these commands, but we still sense how impossible they seem.

Rather than looking at these commands as simply impossible to do, let's look at them as an invitation to turn to Jesus for the healing and strength we need to mirror His perfect love and mercy. We really can do all things through Christ. (Philippians 4:13) All it takes is time, patience, and a willing heart to change. When we look in the mirror,

what do we see? Is it the face bound by resentments and hate? Or is it the face of Christ, ready to forgive and therefore open our lives to a new future?

We know from Jesus' teaching that the meaning of life can be summed up in one word: *love*. We were created to *be* love, and *to* love. Without love, our lives burn out little by little, like a candle that cannot get enough air. We have all memorized the two *Great Commandments*: "*Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbour as yourself.*"

Jesus' teaching of love calls for forgiveness. When we allow our hatred or our anger to be turned into compassionate love, then truly we will become closer to God and feel more closely His compassionate love. Think of what it is like when, instead of hitting back with anger, we try to feel the other person's pain and instead, try to love the person.

We can say the words, but what is the meaning behind those words, especially the word *love*? Are those words coming from your heart? Christ-love, real love, the kind of love that lasts and gives meaning to life, is not a *passive* feeling, it is *active self-giving*. Love is not self-centered, but other-centered, Christ-centered. To quote from Saint Teresa of Calcutta, "I have found the paradox that if I love until it hurts, then there is *no hurt*, but only more love."

God loves us. God loves our enemies. God forgives us. God forgives our enemies. When we accept those realities, we place our love in God, and we place our love in our brothers and sisters. If we are harbouring not being able to forgive, or hatred, or resentments or judging, it is a good time to find reconciliation and healing in our life by building some bridges and seeking the grace of forgiveness. It is good for our physical health and definitely good for our spiritual health, for the health of our soul.

As the people of Christ's Church on earth, we must be living examples of forgiveness and compassion shown by Jesus Himself. When our failings humble us, as they often do, we do not want to give up on our desire to be Jesus' disciple. Instead, we come together to pray, to be forgiven, and to be strengthened by Jesus and by one another.

In every Mass we hear the ringing words of Christ "*This is the Cup of My Blood . . . It will be shed for you and for all so that sins may be forgiven.*" Receiving Christ in

Holy Communion, partaking of His Blood shed for the sake of forgiveness, gives us the strength we need to be a people of forgiveness and reconciliation, and not of hatred and vindictiveness. We can and must be like Christ Himself.