

48 Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A September 13, 2020
Sirach 27:30-28, 7 Psalm 103 Romans 14:7-9 Matthew 18:21-35

Today's Gospel is dealing with a subject which concerns us all, that of *forgiveness*. None of us can go through life without getting hurt. So how should we cope with these hurts?

Imagine a world or life where nobody ever forgave anything. Such a world would be cruel, cold, callous and frozen in place. To forgive is not to forget, it is not to excuse, it is not to condone. To forgive is to recognize the damage someone has done to move away from revenge and retaliation but to refuse to be damaged further by what that person has done. The alternative is to be trapped in the past, furious for years over ancient offenses. The hatred, resentment and anger that go with that can become a spiritual cancer on our life.

Then imagine a world in which all of us practiced forgiveness. Our families would be happy places. Siblings and friends would enjoy each other. Grudges would be replaced by invitations to hang out. It all sounds good, but where do we begin? We can begin by listening to God each and every day so we can hear what it is He is asking of us. It isn't easy but forgiveness can provide us with an opportunity to grow, or they can become a stumbling block to our human and spiritual development. Forgiveness is something we have to learn how to do. It doesn't always just come naturally.

When Peter comes to Jesus and says, "*Lord, if a brother or sister sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?*" Jesus says to Peter, "*not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times,*" which means we are to try to be as forgiving as God. No limits. Don't count the times. Just do it. Forgive. Over and over, just like God forgave the Israelites and just like God has forgiven each of us. Jesus says, "*if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your sins.*"

The message of today's Gospel is clear. To be forgiven ourselves, we must extend forgiveness to others. In the Lord's Prayer that Jesus taught us, we pray, "*Father forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.*" We understand this to mean that the measure we use to forgive others will be the measure used by our Lord to forgive our own offenses. In the First Reading from the Book of

Sirach, the writer says, *“Forgive your neighbour the wrong that is done, and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray.”*

In the Lord’s Prayer we pray for a deep experience of God’s forgiveness in our own lives so that we will be able to pass on forgiveness to those who offend us. Without forgiveness we are condemned to live with resentment, with guilt, with living in a prison within ourselves. Is there someone you need to forgive so that you can truly be set free to live in peace and harmony? Do not let the sin of pride stop you from forgiving that person.

Forgiveness is not an indication of weakness. Rather, it shows strength, courage and power. It enables us to stop reacting and to take control of ourselves. In fact, forgiveness does more good for us than for the one we are forgiving because it sets us free. Forgiveness is a precious gift we give ourselves.

In the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, Jesus teaches Peter about the importance of forgiveness. Jesus gives this parable quite a chilling conclusion if we choose *not* to forgive: *“So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”*

Though never easy, even from a human point of view, it makes great sense that we must forgive from our *heart*. When we do, we rid ourselves of the burden of bitterness and resentment. As a result, we experience a sense of freedom, relief, and cleanness. Forgiveness is first and foremost a healing of our hearts, because it is precisely our hearts that are wounded.

Forgiveness implies an understanding of our own poverty, brokenness, and sin, and therefore our own need of forgiveness. This enables us to forgive others with understanding and humility. Forgiveness clears a path for God to forgive us. The only obstacle we can put in the way of God’s forgiveness of our sins is our inability to forgive the sins of others.

We know that forgiving is not an easy process. Forgiveness is more often talked about than put into practice because it is difficult and demanding, and it takes a great deal out of us. Prayer and discernment are part of the process of forgiveness. When we find it very hard to forgive someone, we must humbly acknowledge that we have reached the limit of our own power and invite God to take over.

Our Lord says, *“Pray for those who persecute you.”* Prayer transforms us from being a victim into becoming an intercessor. We can start to see people who have done us wrong in a new light, as individuals themselves in need of healing. To start the process of forgiveness, prayer for the person who has offended us is a good place to begin. We should also pray for ourselves and ask God for the grace we need to forgive the offender. Forgiveness releases our soul from spiritual paralysis and it is the spiritual surgery that brings healing.

Another difficult path in life is the path of forgiveness of ourselves of past events. We either let go of the past, or we continue to be trapped. Whatever happened, whatever was said or done is history now. We can't rewrite the past, and it can't be undone. However, we can learn from it. We can turn it into a choice and let it go.

The only way to let go of past wrongs is through forgiveness. Forgiveness has to do with you. It is a gift that you give yourself. The first and often the only person to be healed by forgiveness is the person who does the forgiving. When I sincerely forgive, I set a prisoner free, and then I'll often discover that the prisoner I set free was myself.

In forgiving others, compassion asks that we gently approach the other person. Compassion makes one realize that the wrongdoer is in pain, even if he or she does not consciously recognize it. The person needs our understanding and love far more than bitterness. Forgiving is an ongoing process in relationships, especially those who are close to us, those we love. Sometimes it can be a long-drawn-out process. The journey begins when we make the decision to take the first steps.

Our failure to forgive means that we have forgotten Christ's unconditional forgiveness we have received from Him. We need to forgive. We need to do this for our own spiritual health, as well as for the health of our relationship with our brothers and sisters in Christ. Jesus says, blessed are those who forgive for they shall obtain mercy and forgiveness and pardon for their sins. And as *“seventy-seven”* represents the limitless nature of God's mercy toward us, so we can make it represent ours to one another.