

24th Sunday O.T.A

“How often must I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus answered Peter, **“I say to you, not seven times but seventy-seven times.”**

Forgiveness, for Jesus, is not a countable event. It is a quality; a way of being, a way of living, a way of loving, a way of relating, a way of thinking and seeing. It is nothing less than the way of Christ. If we are to follow Christ, then it must become our way as well. **“I say to you, not seven times but seventy-seven times.”**

Does that mean the drunk driver? Yes. The cheating spouse? Yes. The lying businessman? Yes. The racist? Yes. The bully? Yes. The abusive parent? Yes. The greedy corporation? Yes. Even the terrorists of 9/11? Yes.

Today Jesus teaches us to forgive. Every one of us could tell stories of being hurt or victimized by another. Beneath the pain, the wounds, the losses, and the memories lie the question of forgiveness.

Everyone, I suspect, is in favor of forgiveness, at least in principle. **“Everyone,”** C.S. Lewis writes, **“says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until there is something to forgive.”** What do we do then? What do we do when there is something to forgive?

Some will strike back seeking revenge. Some will run away from life and relationships. Some will let the darkness paralyze them. I don't say that out of criticism or judgment of someone else but out of my own experience. I have done them all. I know how hard forgiveness can be.

Like you, I struggle with it too, and often avoid it. I also know that none of those answers are the way of Christ. All of them leave us stuck in the past, tied to the evil of another, and deprived of the future God wants to give us.

Forgiveness is the only way forward. That does not mean we forget or approve of what was done. It does not mean we ignore or excuse cruelty or injustice. It means we are released from them. We let go of the thoughts and fantasies of revenge. We look to the future rather than the past. We try to see and love as God sees and loves. Forgiveness is a way in which we align our life with God's life. To withhold forgiveness is to put ourselves in the place of God, the ultimate judge to whom all are accountable.

God's forgiveness and human forgiveness are integrally related. That is more than apparent in today's parable. The king forgives his servant an extraordinary amount. It seems there is no debt too large to be forgiven. This man, this debtor, was forgiven. That's what the kingdom of heaven is like. That's how our God is. This servant, however, refused to forgive his fellow servant a much smaller amount. Too often that's what our world is like. Frequently, it is how we are. In that refusal, the forgiven servant lost his forgiveness.

This should not be news to us. We know it well. We acknowledge and pray it every Sunday and I will bet most of you pray it every day. **“Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”** We pray those words with ease and familiarity, but do we live our prayer? Do

our actions support our request? **“I say to you, not seven times but seventy-seven times.”**

That’s a lot of forgiveness but the pain of the world, our nation, and individuals is great. We need to forgive as much, maybe more, for ourselves as for the one we forgive. Forgiving those who trespass against us is the salve that begins to heal our wounds. It may not change the one who hurt you, but I promise you this. Your life will be more alive, more grace-filled, more whole, more God-like for having forgiven another.

Forgiveness creates space for new life. Forgiveness is an act of hopefulness and resurrection for the one who forgives. It is the healing of our soul and life. Forgiveness takes us out of darkness into light, from death to life. It separates us from the evil of another. It is the refusal to let our future be determined by the past. It is the letting go of the thoughts, the hatred, the fear that fills us so that we might live and love again.

So how do we begin to forgive? There is no easy road to forgiveness. Don’t let anyone tell you, **“Just give it up to God. Forgive and forget.”** Forgiving another takes time and work. It is something we must practice every day. It begins with recognition and thanksgiving that we have been forgiven. We are the beneficiaries of the crucified one. Hanging between two thieves he prayed, **“Father, forgive them.”** That is the cry of infinite forgiveness, a cry we are to echo in our own lives, in our families, our workplaces, our parishes, and our day-to-day lives.

Forgiveness does not originate in us. It begins with God. That's what the servant who refused to forgive didn't understand. It was not about him. It is about God. We do not choose to forgive. We only choose to share the forgiveness we have already received. Then we chose again, and then again, and then yet again. For most of us, forgiveness is a process that we live in. Sometimes, however, we just cannot. The pain is too much, the wound too raw, the memories too real. On those days we chose to want to forgive. Somedays we choose to want to forgive. Then there are those days when all we can do is choose to want to want to want to forgive. But we choose because that's the choice Christ made.

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

How many times must we choose to forgive? Tell me this. How many times have you been hurt and suffered by the actions or words of another? How many times has anger or fear controlled you? How many times has the thought of revenge filled you? How many times have you shuddered at the sight, the name, or the memory of another? How many times have you replayed in your head the argument with another? That's how many times you choose. With each choice, we move a step closer to forgiveness. Then one day, God willing, we will meet, victims and perpetrators, as happy thieves in the Paradise of God, the Father of us all.

“Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.” Amen.