24th Sunday of Ordinary Time On Forgiving Others

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Here is a good story that I found: A man goes to the doctor, worried about his wife's temper. The doctor asks: "What's the problem?" The man says: "Doctor, I don't know what to do. Every day my wife seems to lose her temper for no reason. It worries me." The doctor says: "I have a cure for that. When it seems that your wife is getting angry, just take a glass of water and start swishing it in your mouth. Just swish and swish but don't swallow it until she either leaves the room or calms down."

Two weeks later the man comes back to the doctor looking fresh and reborn. The man says: "Doctor that was a brilliant idea! Every time my wife started getting angry with me, I swished with water. I swished and swished, and she calmed right down! How does a glass of water do that?" The doctor says: "The water itself does nothing. It's keeping your mouth shut that does the trick."

Here is another good one… a wife finds out that her husband did something incredibly stupid and confronts him on it. The husband is truly sorry for what he did and apologized profusely, promising never to that again. The wife is finally satisfied by that and says, “Well, it is my policy to forgive and forget, so I forgive you.”

However, over the course of the following weeks, the wife continues to remind her husband a number of times of the stupid thing he did. Finally, exasperated, the husband asks her sheepishly, “I thought it was your policy to forgive and forget?” To which the wife responds, “It is. I just don’t want you to forget that I have forgiven and forgotten!”

What do these jokes have to do with today’s readings? Preciously little…but bear with me! Our first reading from Sirach begins, “Wrath and anger are hateful things, yet the sinner hugs them tight.” How true is that, for all of us? In our Gospel reading, Peter asks Jesus, “Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus answers, “I say to you, not seven times but seventy seven times”. In our second reading, St. Paul summarizes our Christian vocation, “None of us lives for oneself…we live for the Lord.”

I believe the readings this Sunday are pointing to a very human problem that we all struggle with at times, namely forgiveness. What was really interesting to me was, back in 2001, the Sunday after 9/11 that was also the 24th Sunday of Ordinary Time Cycle A, same as this weekend, with the same readings, calling us to forgive. That was really, really hard; however, I also believe it was good for our souls back then. And there is still so much going on in our country and world today that we can be justifiably angry about. Of course, the commandment to forgive doesn’t mean that we don’t protect ourselves or seek justice; however, the
commandment to forgive does demand that we do so in a spirit of Christian love, even if it is a tough love like we talked about last weekend. We must at the very least pray for those who persecute us. We must pray for their conversion of heart and for their salvation.

However, in my experience as a pastor, the people who really hurt us in this life aren’t the faces we see on television or what is happening in the world today. The people who really hurt us, who sincerely challenge our ability to forgive, are usually the folks who are closest to us, perhaps at work, perhaps at home, people who we thought cared for us, and the people who we thought loved us. Those are the people that can hurt us the most. And when they do, it really hurts, and we can be tempted to carry anger and resentment forever. Like we hear from Sirach, “Wrath and anger are hateful things, yet the sinner holds them tight.”

What does wrath and anger do to us though? In my humble opinion, they eventually eat a hole through our stomach, and eventually they eat a hole through our soul. How is that good for us or for anyone? And so, Jesus suggests something radical. He suggests forgiveness. Again, forgiveness doesn’t mean that we don’t seek justice that is objectively fair for the circumstance. Forgiveness doesn’t mean that we necessarily restore trust to someone either until that trust is earned. Forgiveness means praying for the salvation for those who wrong us. And if we find that too difficult, we need to pray for the grace to pray for their salvation. Why? “None of us lives for oneself…we live for the Lord”, says St. Paul.

And so, who are the people we need to forgive seven times seventy seven times? Who are those people in our lives who have hurt us, who cause us to brood over injury every day? Are we better off harboring that pain day in and day out or are we better off entrusting their souls to our good and gracious God? Are we better off hoping for their unhappiness or are we better off praying for their conversion? Are we better off blaming someone else for our misery, or do we dare recognize the truth: that we are ultimately responsible for our own happiness or unhappiness in this life. The biggest obstacle to forgiveness is our egos, of course. Humility is what is required when tasked with healing and forgiveness.

When I find myself brooding over injury, there is litany I like to pray that helps me onto the road to forgiveness. It is the Litany of Humility by Cardinal Rafael Merry de Val, who was the Secretary of State for St. Pius X. Copies can be found at the ends of each pew, pass them down. Let’s conclude by praying this together. You are welcome to take a copy home with you.
Litany of Humility

Rafael Cardinal Merry del Val (1865-1930), Secretary of State for Pope Saint Pius X

O Jesus! meek and humble of heart, Hear me.
From the desire of being esteemed,
Deliver me, Jesus.

From the desire of being loved...
From the desire of being extolled ...
From the desire of being honored ...
From the desire of being praised ...
From the desire of being preferred to others...
From the desire of being consulted ...
From the desire of being approved ...
From the fear of being humiliated ...
From the fear of being despised...
From the fear of suffering rebukes ...
From the fear of being calumniated ...
From the fear of being forgotten ...
From the fear of being ridiculed ...
From the fear of being wronged ...
From the fear of being suspected ...

That others may be loved more than I,
Jesus, grant me the grace to desire it.

That others may be esteemed more than I ...
That, in the opinion of the world,
others may increase and I may decrease ...
That others may be chosen and I set aside ...
That others may be praised and I unnoticed ...
That others may be preferred to me in everything...
That others may become holier than I, provided that I may become as holy as I should...