

Twenty-Fourth Sunday In Ordinary Time – 9/17/17

My dear people of God. I would like to make today's Opening Prayer as the backdrop of our meditation. We may recall that the Opening Prayer(or Collect) went this way:

**“Look upon us, O God,
Creator and ruler of all things,
and, that we may feel the working of your mercy,
grant that we may serve you with all our heart . . .”**

Today's readings can bring out the best and the worst from inside us. Why the best and why the worst? Let us interiorize these passages first before concluding why these readings can bring out the best and the worst in us:

- 1. *"Moved with compassion the master of that servant let him go and forgave him"* (Matt 18:27).**
- 2. *" whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's."*(Rom. 14:8)**
- 3. *"Could anyone nourish anger against another and expect healing from the LORD? Could anyone refuse mercy to another like himself, can he seek pardon for his own sins? If one who is but flesh cherishes wrath, who will forgive his sins?"* (Sirach 28:3-5)**

We need to understand that our own experience of forgiveness leads us to a radical understanding of grace.

Let me speak in the first person singular: I am saved, not by getting it right, but by the love that redeems me while I am getting it all wrong. God is not fed up with me yet; He is not done with me yet. I can extend a hand of reconciliation based on my experience of being forgiven by God.

Or I can claim that my adversary does not deserve any forgiveness from me because I feel that he is not repentant anyway. I am the sole judge of my feelings. Brothers and sisters, if I behave this way, if I claim that I am the sole judge of my feelings, chances are that I will not be forgiven by God either.

So, let us look at the first reading with more honesty. The first reading reminds us that if we truly desire to be reconciled to those who have wounded

us, we must first offer the gift of reconciliation. *"Could anyone nourish anger against another and expect healing from the Lord? Could anyone refuse mercy to another like himself, can he seek pardon for his own sins?"* (Sir 28:3-4). The author was very much aware that this is very hard, yet he insisted that we cannot expect God to show us mercy if we withhold it from others.

We know that forgiveness is a very crucial issue; in fact it is the most pressing issue of all our human problems, as individuals, as communities and as a human family. The future of humanity is in the hands of those who can forgive.

Saint Paul, in today's second reading assures us that we belong to God in all circumstances: *"so then, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. For this is why Christ died and came to life, that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.*

If we belong to the Lord, it behooves that we must imitate Him so that we could belong more deeply to Him. Let us take a more serious look at today's gospel. It is important to understand the two facets of Peter's question:

(1)the first one is a single wrong but we are dealing with a very deep hurt, the kind that remains with us for years and that we find ourselves having to forgive many times over. We think we have forgiven, but when we meet the person who hurt us we realize that we have to start forgiving all over again. This is the question then – how long do we continue with this struggle to forgive the one wrong?

(2)the second one is a series of wrongs and the number of times that we have to forgive.

Brothers and sisters: As always, Jesus does not give us prescriptions; He invites us to enter into the God-like way of seeing things and leaves it to us to decide how we will act out of that God-like way. Jesus' response is in the form of a parable.

And the key to interpreting His message correctly is to understand how a parable is meant to be read. We are accustomed to learning (and teaching) through "edifying stories." In this kind of story the characters are either "good" or "bad"; we are meant to imitate the good ones and avoid imitating the bad. Please know that it is always wrong to read a parable like that. We find that when we identify one of the characters with God, we might end up with a strange God, one who tortures those who don't forgive their enemies, one who burns the cities of those who do not accept his wedding invitation, one who closes the door on the bridesmaids who come late for the wedding feast, etc. We will certainly do an injustice to the parables and we would develop warped/distorted ideas of God as a result of reading them in this way. Why?

Because a parable is an imaginative story which we enter with our feelings. We identify with the various characters as the story unfolds, until at a certain point it strikes us: “I know that feeling!” This is a moment of truth, when we say, “I

now understand grace and celebrate the times when I or others have lived it,” or “I now understand sin and experience a call to conversion.”

Now, going back to this parable: we see a slave who is in a position of total helplessness; his life, and that of his entire family, is in the hands of this king who makes him feel reduced to being less of a human being. Condescendingly the king sets him free of his debts. The story does not portray this slave to be a bad man. His spirit has been broken by the inability to pay.

Allow me to deviate a bit and look at our past experiences. Hardship can extinguish the spark of our natural generosity. Experience tells us how frequently this happens. When we have been made to feel so helpless and impotent that when we find someone with even less power than ourselves we have the tendency to oppress him in turn by using our distorted sense of justice. And we always justify ourselves.

Here are good insights of a theologian: *“The philosophy of retributive justice has brought nothing but chaos and widespread distress to families caught up in it. It has guaranteed a growing level of crime. We need to discover a philosophy that moves from punishment to reconciliation, from vengeance against offenders to healing for victims, from alienation to integration, from negativity and destructiveness to healing and forgiveness. Retributive justice always asks first: how do we punish the offender? Restorative justice asks: how do we restore the well-being of the victim, the community and the offender?”*

We often describe ourselves as ‘the People of God’ and as ‘a people set apart’; and very often such names have been misinterpreted by Christians to mean that we are somehow ‘*God’s elite*’.

To start afresh, working for a reconciliation, after we have been hurt is never easy; it goes against a deeply embedded instinct in our humanity that calls for retribution. But to be God’s elite, we must be the group who seek to continue the reconciliation of the world that was accomplished in the Paschal Mystery of Jesus is what we are about.

In this Mass, while we celebrate this mystery, let us remind ourselves that as ‘a people set apart’ we must be willing to bring forgiveness and new hope into the world. Let us ask ourselves whether we are willing to be reconcilers.

Why was Jesus so insistent about the practice of forgiveness in the lives of His disciples? Peter was probably embarrassed by Jesus' answer to his question 'How often must I forgive?' Jesus told Peter to be far more forgiving than he was suggesting. Peter must forgive seventy-seven times, not seven times.

In saying this, Jesus was not implying that forgiveness could be refused on the seventy-eighth wrong and subsequent occasions. For Jesus, there could be no limit to the number of times people would forgive. Forgiveness was to be a continuous activity and one of the central characteristics of the Christian lifestyle.

So why was Jesus so adamant that His listeners would understand how His message of forgiveness was central to His teaching and preaching? Was it because He wanted to be excessively demanding? Or was it because He knew that forgiveness was among the most difficult challenges for human beings?

Jesus was uncompromising about the centrality of forgiveness because He understood human nature completely. He knew that if people would not forgive one another, and if they could not graciously accept forgiveness from other people when it was offered, then they would be unable to experience God's forgiveness. Jesus understood that the human spirit yearns for acceptance, sympathy, respect, companionship and a sense of belonging. None of these is possible in the absence of forgiveness.

Brothers and sisters, forgiveness enables us to realize these yearnings. Our greatest gift from God, the ability to love, is dependent on our ability to forgive. Forgiveness brings healing. If there is no forgiveness in our lives, then our human nature becomes flawed. We feel isolated. We become less than human. Eventually, our dignity and sense of self-worth would diminish. Our innate beauty derived from being made in the image and likeness of God is shattered. There is a diminution of the quality of human life and living.

What then does God want from us? He asks us to open our hearts to the other person so that we may forgive. Forgiveness is the deepest of God's desires on our behalf, and he hopes that we can forgive each other. We must pray, 'Lord, make my heart like yours'. We must pray that we might become a forgiving people!

Now, I wish to go to the Responsorial Psalm. The Psalmist gives us an indication of how we can overcome this seemingly intractable problem of human life by noting *"Merciful and gracious is the Lord, slow to anger, abounding in mercy"* (Ps 103:8). Later the psalmist adds: *"For as the heavens tower over the earth, so His mercy towers over those who fear him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our sins from us"* (Ps 103:11-12).

What these words tell us is that even though God has no need of mercy, the Lord takes the initiative in showing graciousness and mercy to "those who fear Him."

We can imitate the Lord and be among those who "fear the Lord" by understanding humble place before God and our duty to show mercy to others.

This stands in contrast to the man we meet in today's gospel parable. He is unforgiving even though he has been generously forgiven himself, and all too often we descend to his sort of begrudging spirituality instead of offering mercy as humbly and frequently as we seek it.

Let us remember these words, "Being unable to forgive is the greatest obstacle to holiness!"

May God bless us always.