

## September 17, 2017

Sir 27:30-28:7; Rom 14:7-9; Mt 18:21-35

To forgive someone who has wronged you over and over again - some would say that makes you weak. To take someone back who you stabbed you in the back after you gave them a "last chance" - it just can't be done. I mean there has to be a limit ...right? We have all had situations where we just thought it would be impossible to forgive a specific person. I've been there. In fact, years ago, there was one person I had vowed I'd never forgive - promised myself I'd turn the other way if this person ever came towards me. Then one day I heard again the story from today's Gospel that we have all heard so many times: Peter asks, *Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive?* This sounds like a guy who got burnt, sounds like a guy who is at the end of his rope, sounds like a guy who has already decided to throw in the towel on someone. That's where I was with this person - but then I had to reflect on Jesus' response to Peter's question, on Jesus' answer telling Peter not to have a maximum number of times to forgive. I thought: "if one day I'm going to preach on this, I'd better practice it." My decision to drop the anger, resentment, stubbornness and reach out to the other person to reconcile - that decision made a big difference.

Why do we hold on to these hurts to the point that we let them build into anger and a thoughts to hurt another? Why do we nurse that anger to the point that we think that refusing to forgive is a good way to get someone back for what they did to us? We heard in the first reading *Wrath and anger are hateful things, yet the sinner hugs them tight.* This way of dealing with our hurts winds up spiritually separating us from the God who is loving and merciful. But for some reason we do it anyway. Jesus' instructions to Peter are designed to help us all let go of of resentments. How do we expect that we can be free of these hurts if we hold onto them so tightly? Forgiveness lets us be free of the burden of these resentments that we carry. St. Paul reminds the Romans that as Christians we have been brought into God's saving and reconciling action in the world through Jesus Christ - we really can't just choose to act other than God would act and still remain a functioning member of the Body of Christ.

But don't we deserve to let that person feel a little bit of the pain we feel? Don't we have the right to give them a little back? After all, refusing to forgive is a lot better than smacking them upside the head. I told myself that I had every right to refuse to forgive that person - I gave him plenty of chances and he blew it - he's just getting what he deserves. We really should drop

this feeling of being entitled to take revenge because we have been hurt, and realize that we have responsibilities to God - we have responsibilities to bring God's peace and love to the world, not to bring hate in any situation we think it is useful. St. Paul says: *None of us lives for oneself, and no one dies for oneself. For if we live, we live for the Lord, and if we die, we die for the Lord.* Holding on to hurts and anger harms us, and holding back forgiveness works against the action of Jesus Christ in the world. Jesus came to provide forgiveness for our sins so that we could share eternal life, God expects us to act in the same way he has treated us.

I mean, how can I approach God and ask to be forgiven for all the things I do on a regular basis, and then think it is OK to decide not to forgive others? We heard in the first reading: *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?* We kid ourselves if we think that we don't do anything so bad and don't need pardon from God. We all need forgiveness from God - even if we downplay our own offenses. The sacrament of reconciliation is there to help restore us to the Body of Christ when we have done a mortal wound to our relationship with God, but it also helps us to recognize our need for forgiveness and to help us not slide to that belief that we don't need God's mercy. That false belief only makes us feel superior to those who do wrong to us, and then feel entitled to hurt them by not forgiving.

Look at the Gospel story today. One man is forgiven by his lord, yet he does not really appreciate what was done for him. He then feels entitled to withhold forgiveness from another. He feels superior, he forgets his sin. He forgets what was done for him, he forgets his responsibilities to his lord and to his fellow servant. Jesus uses him as an example and speaks to him words that could be said to all of us: *I forgave you your entire debt because you begged me to. Should you not have had pity on your fellow servant, as I had pity on you?* That's what I had to realize with the person I mentioned before. I had to realize all that I owed God for what he had forgiven in me. I had to realize the part that we are all meant to play in the reconciling action of Jesus in the world by laying aside our feelings of entitlement and forgiving others. The decision to forgive made a great difference in my life because it removed anger and hate, it opened up another pathway for God's love to enter my heart, it allowed me to experience the peace of the reconciliation that followed that day I met with that person and we forgave each other. Whenever we decide to forgive from the heart - even if we have already forgiven that person many times - we experience both a removal of a weight off our heart and also a joining of our heart to the heart of the God who is all love, and all mercy, and all forgiveness.