

“Do You Want Peace? Do You Want Justice? Then Forgive” Homily – 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year “A”

Introduction

On June 17, 2015, self-professed white supremacist Dylann Roof walked into Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina and opened fire, taking the lives of nine members of the African-American congregation. Two days later, the loved ones of those whose lives were lost appeared in court for Roof’s bond hearing, seeing him for the first time face-to-face. After having been invited by the judge presiding over the hearing to make a statement if they wanted, the first one to speak, Nadine Collier, who lost her mother, said the following while holding back tears: “I forgive you ... You took something really precious from me. I will never talk to her ever again, I will never be able to hold her again, but I forgive you and have mercy on your soul.” Others followed suit after her, saying that they, too, forgave the killer.¹

I almost feel as if I can end my homily right here: these ardent disciples of our beloved Lord preach with their lives the lesson of forgiveness so clearly taught in the readings for Mass today far more eloquently than I could with words. Yet, given what has transpired since then and, especially, in these last several months around our nation, further and deeper reflection is in order.

Current Situation

But before going there, let’s think about what happened many year ago, to be exact, nineteen years ago this past Friday. I am referring, of course, to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Or better yet, let us think about those first few months after the attacks. Those of us old enough to remember that terrifying experience will recall what the country was like in the aftermath: Americans pulled together, there was a great sense of national unity and purpose, churches and other houses of worship were crowded, and people were turning to God for peace and strength. It indicates that there was still a semblance a Christian cultural milieu in this country, an awareness of the primacy of God, and so true human solidarity was possible.

Compare that, though, to what we are seeing played out before our eyes now. Contrast the heroic self-emptying forgiveness of the parishioners of Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, victims of the most extreme and despicable acts of racism imaginable, to how people are reacting to the sin of racism today. We are living now in a social climate of moral and even physical violence, the attacking of others who disagree or belong to a category of persons judged unworthy of respect, rather than listening and seeking to understand.

The experience of 9/11 highlighted for us the heroism of our first responders, and yet even they are now being disparaged. Even the police, who are entrusted with protecting individuals and the public order, are being disparaged to the point of being neutralized. Seriously-minded people know that constructive reform is necessary and they will work for that. This is a time, though, when we need them the most and they need our support the most. Let us remember that!

Forgiveness

¹ <https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/movies/2019/06/17/emanuel-explores-power-forgiveness-after-charleston-church-massacre/1478473001/#>.

In contrast to the actions of the parishioners of Emanuel Church, the unrest we are experiencing now indicates how far our country has veered from an awareness of God and from the influence of the Judeo-Christian world view. All the more so when it comes to the lesson of this Sunday, forgiveness, the quintessential Christian quality, as expressed in the fifth petition of the Lord’s Prayer: “forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us,” sometimes translated as, “forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.”

This core principle of our Lord’s teaching, though, was already beginning to germinate at the end of the Old Testament era. The Book of Sirach, written about a century-and-a-half before our Lord’s birth and which we heard from in our first reading, is a prime example of this: “Forgive your neighbor’s injustice; then when you pray, your own sins will be forgiven.”

But there is something new when our Lord comes on the scene, and this is seen in the discrepancy between the saying he gives about forgiving not seven times but seventy-seven times, and the parable that follows. Did you notice? The teaching regards the quantity of forgiveness – that is, there is no limit – but the parable focuses more on the *quality* of forgiveness. The image of debt is central in this parable: “a *debtor* was brought before [the king] who owed him a huge amount,” and, ““You wicked servant! I forgave you your entire *debt* because you begged me to.””

The meaning is that we owed a huge debt to God that we could never pay back ourselves. That is why he sent His Son to take on our human flesh and pay it for us. And so that is why we must in turn forgive others. It is the quality of forgiveness that comes from true repentance and contrition for one’s own sins. Without that, forgiveness is impossible, and therefore peace as well. That is why our Lord taught us to pray to God to forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. In his sermon Number 5 on the Lord’s Prayer, St. Gregory of Nyssa speaks of this, referring to the human race being cast out of the garden that was in the East. When he speaks about looking toward the East, he is referring to paradise. This is what he says:

For instead of the divine garments, we have put on luxuries and reputation, transitory honors, and the quickly passing satisfactions of the flesh, at least as long as we look at this place of distress in which we have been condemned to sojourn. But whenever we turn toward the East ... and recall to our memory how we were cast out from the bright regions of bliss in the East, we shall have reason to utter such prayer. For we live in the shadow of the evil fig tree of material life, and have been cast out from the sight of God. We have deserted to the serpent which eats earth and crawls on it, ... to be occupied with earthly delights, ... to be occupied with a life of pleasure. Having been wrapped up in these things, let us imitate the Prodigal Son after he had endured the long affliction of feeding the swine. When, like him, we return to ourselves and remember the Heavenly Father, we may rightly use these words: ‘Forgive us our debts.’²

Yes, those who lack contrition cannot forgive. “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.”

God at the Center

² “The Lord’s Prayer: Sermon 5,” *Communio*, vol XLV, No. 1, Spring 2018, pp. 189-190.

This is the only answer, this is the only way to bring God back to the center of our society; without God, there is no peace. Sadly, we seem to be continuing to move in the opposite direction, here in our city, in our state, and around the country.

As I'm sure you are aware, the City of San Francisco issued new regulations for public health that will go into effect tomorrow. San Francisco is the most restrictive county in the entire country on the right to worship, and this does not change that. Now, we are told, a limit of fifty, rather than twelve, will be allowed for outdoor gatherings. But why fifty? This Plaza can accommodate several hundred people while observing safe social distancing. And would someone please explain to me the science that justifies the rule allowing only one person in church at a time to pray, but twelve people for the purpose of livestreaming a religious service – especially when the twelve people have to be closer together in the altar area whereas several people praying can be at a further distance apart scattered throughout the church? And yet, the new health order allows indoor services that require extended close one-on-one contact, but still will not allow people to be socially distanced inside of a church. Our city places greater value on hair styling, manicures and massages than it does on prayer and the worship of God. And it doesn't stop there.

The state of Nevada places greater value on gambling in casinos and drinking in bars than worshipping God in church. The state of California places a limit of 100 people indoors for a religious service, but, again, why the arbitrary number of 100? In our Cathedral, that is less than 4% capacity.

I don't know if our public servants actually think that any of us will believe they are treating us with compassion and understanding, let alone equality, but anyone with just an inkling of a sense of fairness can see that the opposite is the case.

Public Witness

I fear for our city, I fear for our nation. But we must not be ruled by fear. We walk by faith, not by sight. And so we must unite, pull together in a common witness of our faith and of the primacy of God. Plans are currently underway to make this happen.

Currently, faithful here in the Archdiocese have begun organizing public demonstrations of our faith for next Sunday, which will be expressed in the form of processions here to the Cathedral for our multiple Masses at 11:00. Yes, next week, our multiple simultaneous Masses on the Plaza will take place at 11:00, not 9:00. The public demonstrations will manifest the rich ethnic diversity of our people united in one Catholic faith. Many of the faithful will be Spanish-speaking, especially those coming from the Mission District, and so some Masses will be offered in Spanish, and others in English.

All throughout her history, the Church has faced attempts by governing authorities to shut her down. She has prevailed when all of the members of the body of Christ joined together in solidarity, solidarity made possible only by a spirit of contrition and recognition of the primacy of God. I invite you all to participate in this public witness of our faith, and to invite your friends and fellow Catholics to join as well.

Conclusion

Yes, we have been enduring unjust treatment at the hands of our elected officials for months, who are stifling our natural right to worship and overstepping the bounds of their authority. But we are Christians, so we must respond peaceably and always in the spirit of responsible citizenship, not with violence, as do those without faith. Those who are repentant,

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contrite for their sins against God and others – only they can be agents of peace, because only they are capable of forgiving.

We have the parishioners of Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church to serve as a guide and inspiration to us. And others as well. God does not cease to raise up new saints in times of unrest and distress. May he grant us the grace to be in that number, for holiness is the only way to end hate, prejudice and injustice once and for all.