

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A-2020)
St. Patrick Church, Milford

The Gospel opens today with a straight on question from Peter – How many times are we to forgive? It is an interesting question for us all. The question requires us to take stock of ourselves as human beings and as Christians when we hear the question – How many times must I forgive? Friday was the 19th anniversary of 9/11! As horrible as that day was, we must never forget that that act of unspeakable terrorism came on the heels of a spate of other such attacks on planes, ships, Embassies, trains, Churches, Synagogues, Mosques and marketplaces. When we think of all the people whose lives were ended or forever disrupted and they were of all religions and nationalities, it is tempting to rationalize or to categorize such acts in a class of their own, unforgivable.

So, if we go by this Gospel, is Christ asking the mother to forgive the drunk driver who killed her child? Is He asking us to forgive every Judas who has ever betrayed us? I would like to make an important observation here; we have to distinguish between crime and sin. You punish crime and you forgive sin. Forgiveness is not just condoning. We can forgive without approving of the offense. Some wounds are simply unforgettable.

Some years ago, Saint Pope John Paul went to visit Mehmet Ali Agca, the man who tried to assassinate him. He held his hand and forgave him but he did not ask the Italian Government to release him. The Pope forgave the sin within the crime.

Now I would ask you to think is there anyone in your life who will not forgive you? I know a man who is an alcoholic and, in his drinking days, was abusive to his wife and children. He shamed and embarrassed them, poisoned their minds, turned their hearts and left them with many scars. His children have grown and left home and he went into rehab and is doing well. He has not had a drink in years, he has a great job, he is a good husband but his children, disgusted from years of abuse, want no part of him. Before he dies, he is desperate for their forgiveness. They are either unwilling or unable to forgive so what does he do?

What about the people who will not forgive us? The people we may have wounded. We can do one of two things, we can nurse our guilt, turn into ourselves and destroy ourselves or else we can turn to Jesus. When others will not forgive us, Jesus comes in and takes on their identity. He steps into the place of those we have hurt and he tells us – all is forgiven.

When people will not forgive, Jesus will. When people cannot forgive, Jesus will. When people are unable to forgive, Jesus will. Just look at the Gospel, they tell us the Shepherd left ninety-nine sheep to look for the one or the Gospel of the Prodigal Son when the son repented, the Father went to meet him. He gave him hugs and kisses and said “all is forgiven.” Some of us need to forgive and others need to be forgiven. This is, I suggest, why He gave us the sacrament of confession. It is the place Jesus has set up where you and I are reconciled to the Father.

It is the one place where we can be reassured ... during our broken and dying moment ... that the Lord will come and say: ***“Go in peace, your sins are forgiven. I, on behalf of your mother, your brother, your daughter or anyone who will not forgive you, I will forgive.”*** If you are among those who find it hard or even impossible to forgive. I leave you with the words of the 88-year-old South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu who lived with institutionalized racial segregation called “apartheid”. He said: ***“sometimes the victim has to forgive in order just to live. You cannot carry around resentment forever, sometimes for our own sake, we just have to let go.”***