Fr. Curtis Miller   September 12-13, 2020   Homily for the 24th Sun. of Ordinary Time

As Christians, we believe that if we forgive other people for the wrongs they have done to us, then we will be forgiven by God for our sins when we ask for it. However, if we are not forgiving, then we will not be forgiven by God. I think that we all want to be forgiving people, but it can be very hard, especially when someone isn't sorry for what they've done to us or they continue to hurt us. We can't be glib about forgiveness; it's hard. There are evils afflicted upon us that are so terrible and unjust that it can sometimes feel impossible to forgive. I can't stand up here and just say, "Forgive and forget; it's easy," because that's not true. But it is precisely because forgiving is hard that it is so powerful.

Now, let's be clear about what forgiveness is and isn't. To forgive is to choose not to hate or resent someone because of something bad they did to you or someone else. It does not mean that we pretend away the injury or ignore continued faults. Forgiveness does not mean allowing someone to continue doing something that is wrong or harmful. Justice requires us to try to stop evil behavior and bring healing to victims. But throughout this process, we must control our emotions and never to stray into hatred, or acts of vengeance and retaliation. Why? Because when we do, we allow the other person to control us. And, in their twisted logic, they can point to our retaliation as justification of their initial attack (conveniently forgetting the actual sequence of events).

Also, it has been said that holding a grudge against someone is like drinking poison in hopes that it will hurt the guilty person. It won't. Many times, the other person won't care or notice, but we can be sure that it will do damage to ourselves, eating away at us from the inside, robbing us of peace, and trapping us in a cycle of angry thoughts. Instead, if we forgive, then we allow ourselves to have peace inside, despite the ways we have been hurt.

When we see others who are not repenting of their sins against us, and we feel that pain, it gives us an opportunity to turn the mirror upon ourselves and ask, "Are there any sins I have committed against God or other people that I have not yet repented of?" Let us humbly seek forgiveness for our own faults, then we might be better disposed to forgiving, instead of being like that unforgiving servant in today's Gospel parable.

It also helps to have compassion, to realize that the person who hurt us very often does that because they have also been hurt, perhaps in the same way. If we can look upon those who have hurt us with pity instead of rage, then we can break the cycle, and stop ourselves from passing on hurt to the people around us. It also allows us to unite ourselves more deeply with Jesus, Who prayed on the cross for His executioners, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

Nineteen years ago this week, the former bishop of our diocese, Bishop Kenneth Angell, gave one of the most powerful witnesses of Christian forgiveness I have ever seen. He had just attended a weekend family reunion on Cape Cod, and had enjoyed spending time with loved ones, including his younger brother David with his wife Lynn. They didn't get to see each other often because David was a television producer who lived out on the west coast, in LA. However, David and his wife were having a home built for their retirement in Massachusetts, so that they could be closer to their family. David and Lynn stayed an extra day to check out their new home, then boarded an early Tuesday morning flight out of Boston bound for LA. They didn't make it that far. Why? Because that Tuesday was September 11th, 2001. David and Lynn were aboard American Airlines Flight 11, the first plane that was hijacked and crashed into the World Trade Center in New York on that terrible day.

Bishop Angell was devastated when he realized that David and Lynn had been on that flight. The next day, he offered a memorial Mass at St. Joseph's in Burlington for his brother, sister-in-law, and the three thousand other victims. At the Mass, he also prayed for the perpetrators of the attack, that they repent of the evil they had done. After the Mass, reporters asked Bishop Angell how he could pray for those responsible for his brother's death. He replied simply, "I am a Christian. I have to forgive, so I do." With those few simple words, Bishop Angell preached his greatest sermon, and he showed us what Christian forgiveness looks like.

Who do you and I need to forgive? What can we do to bring about healing? I'm not saying that we now need to become best friends with this person and spend all our time with them. That would be unrealistic, and it could also lead to a renewed conflict. However, if there is someone who continues to have that hold on our thoughts, let's choose to forgive them. That way, we will be able to have more peace in our lives and have hearts that are open to receiving forgiveness from God.