

TO FORGIVE IS TO BE FORGIVEN

24TH Sunday Ordinary Time

Year A

Sir 27:30-28:7; Ps 103:1-4,9-12; Rom 14:7-9; Matt 18:21-35

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The year was 1830...when George Wilson was caught by a government employee as he was robbing mail. He killed the government worker to cover his crime. Well, George was tried, convicted, and condemned to death by hanging...But while on death row, the President of the United States, Andrew Jackson, granted him a full executive pardon. George Wilson, however, refused to accept that pardon. The Department of Corrections didn't know what to do, so the case was referred to the Supreme Court where Chief Justice John Marshall ruled that "*a pardon is a slip of paper, the value of which is determined by the acceptance of the person to be pardoned. If it is refused, it is no pardon. George Wilson, therefore, must be hanged.*" And hanged he was. Even we who are opposed to the death penalty, cannot but agree with the principle that pardon granted has to be accepted to become effectual.

Likewise, when God forgives us, we must accept God's forgiveness. Today's Gospel then goes on to show us that the way to accept God's forgiveness is not just to say "*Amen, so be it!*", but to be forgiving of others from our hearts and to demonstrate that

mercy by actually forgiving those who have wronged us. Then we are predisposed to accepting God's pardon of our wrongs.

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant raises the frightening prospect that pardon, already granted by God, could be ineffectual, or even revoked. The king who forgave his unworthy servant his debt, meant it from his heart. But when the servant later failed to forgive his fellow servant, the king revoked his pardon. By his unmerciful attitude manifested in his actions, the unforgiving servant had shown that he did not appreciate the pardon he had just received.

Is this a good analogy of how God deals with us? That seems to be the point of the parable as Jesus warns us in the end: "*So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives your brother from your heart.*" [Matt 18:35] In other words, when God gives us His word of forgiveness, everything is not over yet. The deal is finally concluded only when we are able to go out and forgive those who sin against us. The free grace of God's forgiveness needs our response of forgiving our neighbor in order for our forgiveness to be

finally ratified. Is that not a frightening thought? Look again at the words of Sirach in today's Old Testament reading: "*Forgive your neighbor's injustice; then when you pray, your own sins will be forgiven.*" [Sir 28:2] Look at the words of the "Our Father": "*Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us*". Sounds almost conditional, doesn't it? I'll tell you what's also frightening: How would we like for God to forgive us the way we forgive others? Hummm...now that's food for thought!

Even though forgiving others anchors God's forgiveness in our own lives, why do we sometimes still find it hard to forgive others? Maybe that's because we fail to appreciate and celebrate our own forgiveness. Like the ungrateful servant in the version of the parable found in other translations that specify the amount of debt owed, we focus on the hundred denarii our neighbor owes us, rather than the ten thousand talents we owe to God—a huge debt that God has graciously cancelled on our behalf.

Let's think about this in proportion. A denarius was a worker's daily wage, so the fellow servant owed the unforgiving

servant 100 days pay, which could be paid back in several months. But the unforgiving servant owed his master 10,000 talents. Since each talent was equal to 6,000 denarii, he owed his master the equivalent of 60 million denarii. Well, for a laborer working 5 days a week, 48 weeks a year, it would take 250,000 years to raise that kind of money. This astronomical figure shows that the servant owed his master so much that there was absolutely no way he could ever hope to repay.

Isn't this symbolic of the debt each of us owes God for our sins...a debt we could never, ever hope to repay, even if we spent our whole life in sackcloth and ashes? But God in his infinite mercy sent His own Son to die on the cross and pay the debt for our sins. And all He asks of us is to be grateful...to realize that what He has done for us is so much more than we could ever be required to do for our neighbor.

If we find ourselves in the club of those who find it so hard to forgive other people, chances are that we've not come to appreciate and celebrate sufficiently the immeasurable forgiveness that we

ourselves have received from God when at the death of His son, He marked our insurmountable debt: “Paid in Full!” We must acknowledge and emphasize God’s forgiveness of us and not cherish our wrath, nourish our anger, and refuse mercy to others who have wronged us.

This past Friday marked the 19th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks that killed thousands of our brothers and sisters in New York, Washington D.C., and Pennsylvania. But did you ever stop to think that the perpetrators of that horrific crime were also brothers in our humanity? Weren’t we all created and loved by the same Creator who sent His son to die for all sins and all sinners? In addition to praying for those victims who perished and for their families, shouldn’t we as well pray for the criminals and for their families? Could they not be the neighbors who “...trespassed against us”? Are we to forgive only other Christians or only other Americans; or are we to forgive all who wrong us and do us injustice?

As we approach the unending gift of Christ's body and blood at the altar of the Eucharist, may we pray for a deeper appreciation of the amazing love that God has shown us in Christ. It is this awareness that will make it easier for us to let others off the hook for their relatively minor offenses against us. The mercy and forgiveness we show to others should be the heartfelt expression of our gratitude for the mercy and forgiveness shown to us by the Father. God is a Father of all tenderness, but He is also a Father full of justice. He allowed His son to die on the cross for both love and justice. Let us not render His forgiveness ineffectual because of our own unforgiving heart and actions. May we always remember that "To Forgive is to be Forgiven"....

May God Bless You All!