

September 13, 2020 11:30 a.m. St. Augustine Cathedral

Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

As we gather together as people of faith celebrating this 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time, we're also mindful that just two days ago, we all observed the 19th anniversary of "9/11". The hateful and merciless acts of violence perpetrated that day abruptly ended nearly 3,000 peoples' lives and changed the world forever. And 19 years later, we continue to grieve that loss of life, but also remain inspired by the incredible examples of courage and heroism that we all witnessed by so many in those fateful days.

It is particularly appropriate then, that the Readings from God's Holy Word on this Sunday following that anniversary focus our attention on the need to show "mercy" and "forgiveness" even in the face of the most despicable and hateful acts. But mostly, today's Scriptures speak to us about the primary aspect of God's Nature for which we should be most grateful, namely: the largesse---the benevolence---the incredible generosity of God's Love and Mercy. God's Love for us is unconditional and it is limitless. God forgives all the sins we have ever committed, if we are repentant; God will forgive even the most awful sins we could even imagine, if we are truly sorry. However the fact is: in justice, God owes us nothing; but in mercy and love, God has given us everything!

Today's first Reading from the Old Testament Wisdom Book of Sirach tells us that while God is faithful to His Covenant of unconditional Love for us, He also will honor the choice that we human beings make if, instead of loving our neighbor who offends us, hurts us, and sins against us, we choose to hug tight "*wrath and anger*" against them. Sirach begs us to "*remember our last days*"----meaning that we are mortal human beings; one day our lives in this world will come to an end, and we will have to give God an accounting of our lives. Therefore, as the Reading continues, we should "*set enmity aside,....overlook faults, ...and cease from sin.*"

Today's Psalm provides for us a refrain that we should always keep in mind: "*The Lord is kind and merciful, slow to anger, and rich in compassion*"! "*He pardons all your iniquities, He heals all your ills; He redeems your life from destruction---He crowns you with kindness and compassion.*" Isn't that wonderfully reassuring? When all is said and done, even in the midst of life's

greatest tragedies, we are comforted to know that our God loves us----is with us--
--and as a sign of His Love, our God forgives us.

However, even as we are reassured by God's Love, compassion and mercy for us, there is another side to God's Word today that is quite a bit more challenging. And that is that our God expects us to follow His example and act in that same way toward one another. Our God expects us---in fact has commanded us--- to love our sisters and brothers in the human family, which includes even those we call "our enemies"----to love them, as God loves us. And when others offend us, hurt us, or even attack us, we are commanded to be merciful and forgiving, as God is.

That goes against our human tendencies, which as we all know, are that when someone offends, hurts, or attacks us, we tend to want to retaliate---to get back at them, get even, "tit for tat", or even more. We are prone to get angry, hold grudges or seek revenge, or as Sirach put it so well, we tend to hold onto our wrath, anger, and grudges and "*hug them tight*". We feel justified in that anger, and somehow, we think that violence will be a solution, when we all know that it simply aggravates and escalates the problem; and further divides our relationships, and the human family.

So how do we, human beings, act like God, "*the Lord Who is kind and merciful, slow to anger and rich in compassion*"? How do we with our human tendencies to hold tight to our grudges and take revenge on those who hurt us, break that cycle of "reactive behavior"? God realized that was our greatest challenge as well, which is why, "*in the fullness of time*", God gave us the greatest Gift He could give us: He sent us His only-begotten Son, Jesus, to become one with us, and to teach us about God, and to show us how to act like God.

This morning's Gospel Reading is so beautiful because it shows us how we need to allow God's Love to s-t-r-e-t-c-h us from our human tendencies, and to help us to choose to follow Jesus' way of compassion and mercy. Once again, the spotlight shines on Peter, who poses a question to Jesus: "*Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive. As many as seven times?*" Peter obviously thought he was greatly impressing Jesus with his extreme generosity in expanding on what the Rabbis taught, that according to their interpretation of the Law, people only needed to forgive another person 3 times. Jesus just said, in effect, "Oh Peter, Peter, Peter....no, not 7 times, but 77 times----777 times-----7,777 times. In other words, as many times as you are sinned against! Jesus then went

on to tell a two-part Parable that is so clear in its meaning that it's almost impossible for us to miss the point!

In the first part of the Parable, we see a servant who is so deeply in debt to his master that, even though he has no hope of ever being able to repay it, begs his master *"Be patient with me, and I will pay you back in full."* Not only was the Master patient with him, he did what was unimaginable---he wrote off the entire debt.

Now, let's each take a moment to think about all of the sins that you, and I, have committed in our lifetime up until now.....Now, let's add into that thought, the sins of every one of us gathered here for Mass this morning, as well as those participating virtually this morning..... And now, let's add in the sins of all the people in the world today, the sins of all the people who have lived in the thousands of years before us; and all the people who will ever live in the millennia to come.....God, in His Mercy, forgives all those sins, absolutely. That was the point of the first part of Jesus' Parable----God our Father is the "Master" in the Parable, Who is not only patient with us, but incredibly, unimaginably merciful. *"The Lord is kind and merciful; slow to anger, and rich in compassion."*

It's the second part of the Parable that's the real "kicker", so to speak. That servant whose huge, impossible-to-repay debt, had been "forgiven" by the Master, refused to do the same to a fellow-servant who owed him a mere pittance. Not only would he not forgive him, he had him put into jail. Now the application is pretty obvious, isn't it? We all know how much we constantly need God's love and mercy; we also know that, at times, we even take God's love and mercy for granted---we just expect it. And yet, when it comes to us being merciful and forgiving to others??? Well, all of a sudden, you and I probably seem a bit more like that *"wicked servant"* in Part II.

Jesus, Who was on His way to Jerusalem where He knew He was about to die, was also applying this Parable to Himself, as well as to Peter. Because this Parable actually anticipates Jesus' incredibly generous Act of Sacrificial Love when He, the Son of God, would suffer and die for the remission of the sins of the world. And as He was dying on the Cross, among His last words were words of forgiveness: *"Father, forgive them for they know not what they do!"* Jesus wasn't just asking His Father to forgive those who scourged His back, or crowned His head, or hammered in the nails; He wasn't asking God to forgive Judas for betraying Him, or Peter for denying Him, or Pilate for washing His hands of Him. No, Jesus was

asking His Father to forgive all people everywhere, for all times, including you and me.

As you might know, tomorrow---September 14th---is the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross. And that's what that Feast proclaims, that nailed to the Cross, Jesus reconciled all the sins humanity had ever, or would ever, inflict on one another. On the Cross, Jesus extended the Hand of God's Forgiveness and reconciliation. Exalted high on the Cross, Jesus settled all our accounts. As St. Paul told us so beautifully in today's Second Reading: *"This is why Christ died and came to Life, that He might be Lord of both the dead and the living."*

The Venerable Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, who some of us actually remember for his beautiful, poignant and powerful preaching on the Scriptures and the Teachings of our Faith, said one time: "Generosity is measured, not by how much you give, but by how much you have left over." When we give, we tend to make sure there's enough left for me; God's generosity is measured by the fact that it is "measure-less", "limit-less", unending. God can never be outdone in His generosity, and will never stop loving.

While we have limited material possessions, money, and time, there is a way in which we are just like God because we, too, can love all people; we can be merciful to all people; we can show compassion to all people, including those who mistreat us, or deal unjustly with us. We are only limited in what we can do, by what we choose not to do; when we choose not to be merciful, compassionate, or loving.

It remains for us to accept what Jesus did, and then, to choose to open our hearts to others who hurt us, and say: "In Jesus' Name, and by the Power of His Grace (for by our own power, we could never do this), I forgive you. That's what enables us to be truly free. And that's when----and only when---we will find peace, and true and lasting joy.

Yes, *"The Lord is kind and merciful, slow to anger, and rich in compassion."* And so must we be!