

September 17, 2017
24th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Matthew 18:21-35

Peter approached Jesus and asked him, "Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive him? As many as seven times?"

Jesus answered, "I say to you, not seven times but seventy-seven times. That is why the kingdom of heaven may be likened to a king who decided to settle accounts with his servants. When he began the accounting, a debtor was brought before him who owed him a huge amount. Since he had no way of paying it back, his master ordered him to be sold, along with his wife, his children, and all his property, in payment of the debt. At that, the servant fell down, did him homage, and said, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back in full.' Moved with compassion, the master of that servant let him go and forgave him the loan. When that servant had left, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a much smaller amount. He seized him and started to choke him, demanding, 'Pay back what you owe.' Falling to his knees, his fellow servant begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' But he refused. Instead, he had him put in prison until he paid back the debt. Now when his fellow servants saw what had happened, they were deeply disturbed, and went to their master and reported the whole affair. His master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you your entire debt because you begged me to. Should you not have had pity on your fellow servant, as I had pity on you?' Then in anger his master handed him over to the torturers until he should pay back the whole debt.

So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives his brother from his heart."

Background:

The gospels for last week and this week center around Jesus' instruction on the disciples' need to deal with conflicts in ways that do not cause harm to the community. Last week Jesus told the disciples that when one feels they have been offended, they should seek reconciliation with that person, even if they are unaware of their transgression. The goal of Jesus' instructions seems to be engaging others over perceived sources of conflicts, before they cause divisions. In today's gospel Jesus addresses another source of conflict – the need for forgiveness within the community. The text begins with Peter asking about how many times he should forgive, which leads into Jesus' parable on the importance for the disciples to act out of the same need to forgive others as they hope God will have for them.

Peter asks if forgiving another person seven times is sufficient. Jesus insists the members of his community should forgive seventy-seven times. Other translations of this text render it seventy times seven. The point is the same.

Jesus makes his point through a parable which illustrates the underlying values of sharing with others the forgiveness that they have received from God. Verse 23 especially indicates that Jesus is telling the parable to demonstrate how forgiveness is in the realm of God. It also reflects the Near Eastern reality where kings exercised power of life and death. The first debtor owed ten thousand talents. The second owed one denari. It took six thousand denarii to have the equivalent of one talent. The contrast in the amount owed is consistent with the punishment that each could receive. The first could lose wife, children, all his property and most importantly his status as a free person in society. The second man is put in prison until he can repay what he, his family and friends can raise. The response of both men to the possible punishment is exactly the same; it is only the outcome that is different. The last line of the text makes the point. God is like the generous king in the parable who is willing to forgive our great debt. The disciples are expected to imitate that generosity in their own dealings with one another.

The parable also is a window into a very different culture. The role that the community plays in bringing their non-forgiving member to the attention of the King who had just forgiven him his debt is not out of character.

The social pressure on the King to act if he is going to safeguard his reputation within the community is a powerful force that may not be immediately recognized by most westerners as we reflect on this text.

In our society, offenses and events of the day are often reported in terms of economic impact. Wars, hurricanes, and the merger of companies are given a dollar value while relationships and people's lives that will be affected throughout the community are not taken into account. (Money is easier to count than the number of people affected.) Our approach is much different than what would have been the norm for Jesus. The real damage with sin was what it did to the relationships. In the parable, the king forgives an impossible debt (it would have taken 164,000 years of working 7 days a week for a laborer to earn 10,000 talents). He most likely did so because to not do so would mean he would lose honor with the rest of his household. Equally important is the fact that he also must put the servant in jail because of that same code of honor. This society functioned very differently than our own.

Reflection Questions:

1. Have you ever struggled to forgive another?
2. Can you recall mistakes that you have made where you have felt like you were never truly forgiven?
3. Are there also significant occasions when you have been able to forgive others?
4. What do you think Peter is feeling as he asks his question at the beginning of the text?
5. What effect does that have on your relationships?
6. Are there people you know who seem to have a great ability to forgive?
7. AA asks members in recovery to begin to forgive those who have offended them. Why?
What can you learn from this? Would you benefit from having a mentor in the area of forgiveness?
8. In your opinion, is there a difference between forgiving and forgetting?
9. Can you talk to God about your awareness of God's desire to forgive you, your unworthiness of that forgiveness, or some other thought or feeling that this text raises for you?

The gospel background and reflection questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM. They are edited by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel. The excerpts from the Sunday readings are prepared by Joe Thiel. To be added to the distribution list, send your name and email address to annemarie.lom@gmail.com

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Excerpts from the readings for September 17, 2017, the Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Wrath and anger are hateful things, yet the sinner hugs them tight.
The vengeful will suffer the Lord's vengeance, for he remembers their sins in detail.
Forgive your neighbor's injustice; then when you pray, your own sins will be forgiven.
Could anyone nourish anger against another and expect healing from the Lord?
Could anyone refuse mercy to another like himself, can he seek pardon for his own sins?
If one who is but flesh cherishes wrath, who will forgive his sins?
Remember your last days, set enmity aside; remember death and decay, and cease from sin!
Think of the commandments, hate not your neighbor; remember the covenant, and overlook faults.

The Lord is kind and merciful, slow to anger, and rich in compassion.

Bless the Lord, O my soul; and all my being, bless his holy name, and forget not all his benefits. He pardons all your iniquities, heals all your ills. He redeems your life from destruction, crowns you with kindness and compassion. He will not always chide, nor does he keep his wrath forever. Not according to our sins does he deal with us, nor does he requite us according to our crimes. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so surpassing is his kindness toward those who fear him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has he put our transgressions from us.

Brothers and sisters: None of us lives for oneself, and no one dies for oneself. For if we live, we live for the Lord, and if we die, we die for the Lord; so then, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. For this is why Christ died and came to life, that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

Peter asked Jesus, "Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus answered, "Not seven times, but seventy-seven times. The kingdom of heaven is like a king who decided to settle accounts with his servants. A debtor was brought before him who owed him a huge amount. He had no way of paying it back. His master ordered him to be sold, with his wife, his children, and his property, in payment of the debt. The servant said, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back in full.' The master forgave him the loan. That servant found one of his fellow servants who owed him a much smaller amount. He demanded, 'Pay back what you owe.' He begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' But he refused. Instead, he had the fellow servant put in prison until he paid back the debt. His fellow servants were disturbed, and reported the affair to their master. The master said, 'I forgave your debt because you begged me to. Should you not have had pity on your fellow servant?' Then in anger his master handed him over to the torturers until he should pay back the whole debt. So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives your brother from your heart."

Excerpts from Sirach 27:30—28:7; Psalm 103:1-4, 9-12; Romans 14:7-9; and Matthew 18:21-35