

**ECHOING GOD'S WORD
IN
THE CATHOLIC COMMUNITY
SEPTEMBER 17, 2023
24th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME**

SCRIPTURES:

Sirach 27:30 - 28:7	Forgive your neighbor so you can be forgiven.
Romans 14:7-9	Whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.
Matthew 18:21-35	Forgive in order to be forgiven by God.

SCRIPTURE BACKGROUND:

Matthew:

Peter knew the Law of God as given by Moses: It required that he forgive his brother. The tradition said that he should forgive as much as three times when someone had done him wrong. He knew very well that the new rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth, was teaching a radically new ethic based on higher standards. So, he had it all worked out: Jesus would surely praise him if he multiplied the number of times by two and added one more for perfect measure. Seven was considered the perfect number. It represented all the days of creation and even included God's day of rest. So, seven was perfect! He would forgive up to seven times. That certainly would impress Jesus, or so he thought. Jesus says to him, "But, Peter don't you know anything at all? Why are you even counting? Seventy times seven times! That means *always, without reservation, unconditionally, not even waiting for repentance on the part of the offender!*" Those who follow Jesus will not even try to count when it comes to forgiveness.

But then, Jesus gives Peter the reason why he must forgive without counting the number of times: Because of the overwhelmingly generous God who has forgiven him far more than he will ever be asked to forgive! Here comes the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant. A man who owed his master *a huge amount* was forgiven when he asked. This *huge amount* was literally *10,000 talents*. A *talent* was the largest monetary unit in use in the ancient world. It would have been something like our \$1,000 bill! Ten thousand was the largest numeral that could be used in any computation. What this is saying is that the man owed more than he could ever repay even if he worked for a whole lifetime. It is a debt far beyond the capacity of any human to pay. It symbolically refers to the moral debt that Peter has already had forgiven him by God because of the future death and resurrection of Christ. No human could ever even try to pay that. "See what God has forgiven you, Peter! Don't you think you should forgive without counting, without measuring, without ceasing?"

Forgiving from the heart means that one would forgive for spiritual motives, never for what one could gain from it. All the gain has already been accomplished. Have we not been given the kingdom of God when we were forgiven by God? What more do we want? That and more satisfaction yet? But that is impossible.

We do no better than Peter when it comes to appreciating the overwhelmingly generous

act of God in forgiving us our sins. We are proud of ourselves when we are able to forgive even one time. We act as if God owes us a lot for being so kind and so generous. We can't even begin to imagine that we are still debtors to God.

Sirach:

About 180 years before the birth of Jesus, there lived in Jerusalem a teacher of Jewish wisdom whose classroom notes were later taken by his Greek-speaking grandson in Alexandria, Egypt, and framed into what we know as the Book of Ecclesiasticus or Ben Sirach, known to us only in the Greek version. (Therefore, it is not included in the official list or *canon* of the Scriptures recognized by Protestants.) In this book, we find a most extraordinary teaching, one that is so close to the teaching of Jesus: "Forgive your neighbor so that you can be forgiven."

Romans:

Paul writes to the Church at Rome about the bitter separations and divisions with which they are afflicted. The 'conservatives' are scrupulously committed to the dietary and purity laws of the Jewish tradition. The 'liberals' may even be flaunting their new 'freedom' from such restrictions. The first condemn the second, and the second seem to be saying, "See if we care!" Paul says to them both, "Don't you know that you belong to God? How can you be treating each other this way?" The Church today needs to hear this again. Where is our unity with one another? Have we gone so far as to refuse fellowship with those who disagree with us?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. When you made a retreat the last time, did you not say to the Lord, "Have patience with me, Lord. I will do much better from now on." Ask your family or the members of your group to share with you some of the ways they have found helpful in "doing better from now on." Surely, you may be able to share some suggestions that have been helpful to you.
2. Have you ever had a hard time forgiving someone who has grievously hurt you or hurt someone you love? What have you been able to do to come closer to the day of forgiveness? Do you at least want to see that day? What do you think would be helpful to you in bringing you closer to forgiveness?
3. What are some of the injustices that are being practiced in the Church in our times? Do we pray that God will punish or that God will forgive? Do we ourselves, as a community, make efforts to forgive? Or are we rather expecting retribution and adequate compensation? How can we contribute to the healing of those who have been hurt by the Church community?

SUGGESTION FOR CHRISTIAN ACTION

Each of us should make a private list of the number of times we have been forgiven by God and the matter for which we were forgiven. Count the times! Make a parallel list of the times we have forgiven someone else and the matter which was forgiven. Count the times. Compare the count.

PRAYER

“Almighty God, our Creator and Guide,
may we serve you with all our heart
and know your forgiveness in our lives.”

From the Sacramentary for the 24th Sunday

CATHOLIC PASTORAL PRACTICES

Over the centuries, the Catholic Church has had large pieces of real estate taken from its possession and placed in private hands or turned over to other uses. The Church has always protested such expropriations and has sought through every means available to recover its losses. It is difficult simply to let go and to begin again when our property has been taken from us. When it comes to money and other assets, the Church has a hard time to forgive.

In ages past and in other regions of the world, the Church and some of its elements have come to own buildings and lands. Religious orders sometimes were given large tracts of land so that they could support their missions and their works of charity with the income derived from those properties. Schools, hospitals, orphanages, chapels and even parishes were at times endowed with real estate or with security investments in support of their ministries. When hostile governments came to power, the Church was often deprived of these holdings.

In Ireland, for example, most of the ancient cathedrals and parish churches that had been built before the Protestant Reformation were simply turned over to the Church of Ireland (Protestant), and the Catholics had to rebuild when they were granted the freedom to do so. In the Ukraine, the Communist government under the old USSR had taken all the churches belonging to the Eastern Rite Catholic Church and turned them into warehouses, museums, or Orthodox churches. Today, the Catholics want their churches returned to their possession and their use. (By the way, this issue presents one of the major obstacles in our relationship with the Orthodox churches throughout the world.)

In England, during the reign of Henry VIII, in France during the French Revolution, and in many other countries, the Catholic Church has had to begin all over again after having been stripped of its properties. The Church as a whole and its component parts have often been limited in the good it can accomplish when it has lost all of the assets on which it depended to fund its work. Severe pain and deep resentment have often accompanied all such efforts. People will almost always resist any effort to forgive. We cry out for justice!

What would it be like for you and the other members of your parish if your buildings had been taken unjustly and given to a rival group or a competing religious organization? Where would you find the resources to begin again, to forgive also?

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