

Homily of Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time of Year A, 2023

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

While forgiveness is at the heart of Christian spirituality, retaliation and revenge are clearly enshrined in the beliefs and practices of some religions and some cultures and are deep in the way of life of many people. The first reading says, "Anger and wrath are hateful things, yet the sinner hugs them tight." The reading explains how forgiveness is important to our prayer life and our relationship with God: "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?" We pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us" (Matthew 6:12).

Last Sunday, God urgently invited us to forgiveness and reconciliation. The urgent invitation has continued this Sunday. The first reading admonishes us, "Remember the last days, set enmity aside; remember death and decay, and cease from sin!"

The second reading says, "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." If we are the Lord's, then we will forgive as the Lord teaches us. On the Cross, he prayed for those who betrayed him, who judged him wrongly, and those who crucified him, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).

One of the lessons we can draw from the gospel parable is that although we sin against God every day, he does not treat us according to our sins. Yet, many times, we are very unforgiving to one another, even over minor offenses. At the end of the Lord's Prayer, Jesus cautions us, "If you forgive others their wrongdoings, your Father in heaven will also forgive yours. If you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive you either" (Matthew 6:14-15). St. Paul encourages us, "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" (Ephesians 4:32).

Sometimes, we ask, "I have forgiven my neighbor, yet I still remember the offense. Does the remembering mean that I have not forgiven my neighbor?" We must not underestimate the power of memory. Some experiences can remain in our memory for a very long time, and sometimes, for life. However, if we permit God's grace to be at work in us, prayer, time, and goodwill can heal and erase the hurt, even if we may still vaguely remember the experience.

We know that forgiveness and healing have taken place:

- 1) When the offense is no longer vivid in our mind. We have forgotten the details.
- 2) When we no longer refer to the offense to support any kind of claim or reason for our actions.
- 3) We are no longer upset when we remember the offense or the offender, and when we meet the offender.

- 4) When we do not plan to retaliate or punish or wish the offender evil.
- 5) When we treat the offender with acceptance, understanding, and kindness.
- 6) When we are grateful for the lesson or lessons learned from the experience. "All things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28).
- 7) When we acknowledge that we have, also, offended other people many times. We, also, are in need of forgiveness.

Let us conclude with this story:

Two friends, Mike and Nick, were on a journey through a desert and a hill. As they walked on the sand of the desert, Mike tripped over. As he was falling, he held Nick to regain his balance. Unfortunately, Nick lost his balance also, and both of them fell. In order to remember where they fell, Nick marked the spot with his staff. Their journey continued. They got to a hill. Nick was unable to climb. Mike supported Nick and both climbed over the hill. In order to remember how they made it over the hill, Mike marked the spot with his staff where they got over the hill. On their way back, the mark made by Mike on the hill remained very visible. Both men happily remembered how they made it over the hill. Then, they journeyed across the desert and never saw the mark on the sand and never remembered where and how they fell. The spot Nick marked had been erased by desert wind.

We pray that the wind of the Holy Spirit blows on us and erase our offenses against one another, just like the desert wind erased the mark on the sand where Mike and Nick fell. Amen.

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