

Homily of Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time of Year A, 2020

Two friends, Mike and Nick, were on a journey through a desert and a hill. As they were walking 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 of them climbed over the hill. In order to remember how they made it over the hill Mike marked the spot where they got over the hill with his staff. 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. 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.

Christianity is the most radical of all religions because of its teaching on forgiveness. No other religion has so much emphasis on forgiveness as in Christianity. Retaliation and revenge are clearly enshrined in the spirituality of some religions and deep in the way of life of many men and women. 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?" Jesus emphasizes this teaching on forgiveness in Mark 11:25-26, "And when you stand to pray, if you have anything against anyone, forgive, so that your heavenly Father may also forgive your sins." In the Lord's Prayer, we pray to God, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us" (Matthew 6:12). 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 and forgive as he forgives. For 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 we sin against God every day, and many times mortal sins, but 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. James further warns us, "For the judgment is merciless to one who has not shown mercy" (James 2:12).

Sometimes, we ask, "I have forgiven my neighbor, yet I still remember the offense. Does it 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, and sometimes forever. However, prayer, time, and goodwill can heal and erase the hurt, even if we still remember the experience. When this happens, the offense may be remembered, but faintly.

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 make reference to the offense to support any kind of claim or reason for our action or actions.
3. When we are no longer upset when we remember the offense or the offender.
4. When we, in no way, wish to retaliate or wish ill luck to the offender as punishment for the offense.
5. When we treat the offender with acceptance, understanding, and kindness.
6. When we remember the offense, we are grateful for the lesson or lessons we learned from the experience.
7. When we remember the offense, we acknowledge that we have, also, offended other people many times. We, also, are in need of forgiveness.

Let us conclude with words of advice from St. Paul (Ephesians 4:32), "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." May the wind of the Holy Spirit blow on us, heal our hurts and erase the marks of unforgiveness printed on our hearts. Amen.

Fr. Martin Eke, MSP