



Homily for 9/13/2020

24<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time A

Very Rev. J. David Carter, JCL, JV

Seven times seems like a lot. Seven times seems like a lot of forgiveness and mercy. And yet seven times is not enough according to Jesus in the Gospel today. Jesus teaches us in another part of the Gospel that the measure with which we measure will be measured back to us. Do we want to be forgiven? Then we had better forgive. He teaches us also to pray by saying, “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” In today’s Gospel, when asked how often we must forgive, he gives a very strong answer: not seven times, but seventy times seven.

Imagine someone hitting you. It hurts. It takes its toll. You want to hit back. But you are taught to forgive. We can all understand that sometimes people do things they shouldn’t. We understand, because we have done wrong too. So, we forgive the first time, maybe even the seventh time. But how much is too much? What happens when we have been hit the four hundred and ninetieth time? The call to mercy is not a call to become a doormat for everyone to walk on. At a certain point we must exercise prudence and not put ourselves in situations where people treat us badly. But it never means that we want evil upon our neighbor. If we expect to be forgiven, we must forgive.

We all want to be forgiven. But what does it really mean to forgive in light of our God’s clear message of mercy towards others? The answer that Jesus gives is simple. If we expect God to forgive us, we must be ready to forgive others. To understand Jesus’ words, we need to understand the Jewish context in which they were written. How much was owed by the servant? The Spanish translation we have says he owed him a huge amount. But the Greek actually says it was ten thousand talents. A denarius is one day’s wages. A talent was worth six thousand denarii. Thus, if the servant owes ten thousand talents this equals sixty million denarii and it would take him one hundred and sixty thousand years to pay it off. In other words, this is an impossible debt to pay back. This makes the king’s forgiveness such a magnanimous and merciful act. But here we must make an important note. For every act of mercy there is a price. It is not magic. It is not just a disappearing trick. If the king forgives the servant his debt, it does not mean that the debt disappears. The king loses money on the servant in order to free him from the debt. Can you imagine what can be done with sixty million daily wages? That definitely has to hurt the king to lose that much money. Mercy entails taking another’s debt unto oneself. It shows how much love this king has for the servant. This is the true nature of mercy. Mercy means being willing to suffer in place of the other.

This is already a great message. Jesus is telling us that our God is like the king in the parable. He is merciful with those who cannot pay back their own debts. He is willing to suffer for them. But the story continues after that and this is where it gets difficult for us. We hear that this newly forgiven servant, whose debt was impossible to pay back, then goes on to demand payment from his fellow servant whose debt is much smaller. The amount owed to him by his fellow servant is only one hundred days’ worth of debt. This is actually a manageable sum. And yet, he does not show the same mercy to his fellow servant that he himself had received. He was not willing to take on even a small amount of suffering on behalf of the other who was like him, even after someone else had taken his impossible burden from him. This is what causes his damnation. “Then in anger his master handed him over to the torturers until he should pay back the whole debt.” Jesus concludes his parable with this strong exhortation: So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives your brother from your heart.”

The reality is this. We owe the debt of sin to God and we can never repay it. Just like ten thousand talents was beyond the capacity of the servant to pay to the king, so, too, is our debt of sin beyond our capacity to satisfy before God. The debt is for original sin itself and all our own personal sins against God and neighbor. Jesus, as the King, has offered to take that debt to himself on the cross. He pays the price by his innocent blood shed for sinners. We have access to this infinite treasury of mercy when we ask him for it by our humble contrition, repentance, and confessing our sins.



But just like in the parable, there is more to the story. Our Lord clearly links our own forgiveness with the forgiveness of others. If we go to confession, we are forgiven. But we cannot then expect to continue to hold grudges against our neighbor. As we are forgiven, so we must forgive others. So, we ask the question, “How do I forgive someone from my heart?” This is something many people struggle with. You may ask, “if someone hurts me, I must forgive them, but should I also forget what they did and simply treat them as if nothing ever happened?” The answer is that we are called to be prudent even while being merciful. Mercy does not forget prudence. The catechism teaches us, “It is not in our power not to feel or to forget an offense; but the heart that offers itself to the Holy Spirit turns injury into compassion and purifies the memory in transforming the hurt into intercession.” CCC 2843. Mercy means being willing to suffer instead of another. We can turn our wounds into an offering so that the other will not go to hell for what he did. Would you be willing to experience pain so that your loved one will be saved? I’m sure most of us we happily do that. But God asks us to even have this kind of love for our enemies. As Christians we can never damn a person to hell. The moment we wish someone to be in hell for what they have done is the moment we have brought judgement on ourselves. If God does not will the death of the sinner, but rather that he be converted and live, so, too, we must not will the eternal death of the sinner who has hurt us. The first step to forgiving from our heart is to let God have mercy on the person who has hurt you. This means at least wishing that this person, who hurt you, not experience the eternal pains of hell. This is a good first step. Say, “This person hurt me. I don’t like it. I am angry. But, God, my God, because I want to go to heaven and I know that you don’t want anyone to go to hell, I pray, at the least, that this person not suffer the eternal pains of hell for his sins.” That is a good start. But it is also the only way to true peace. Pope Francis taught us in his book *The Face of Mercy* that, “This parable contains a profound teaching for all of us... In short, we are called to show mercy because mercy has first been shown to us... For us Christians it is an imperative from which we cannot excuse ourselves. At times how hard it seems to forgive! And yet pardon is the instrument placed into our fragile hands to attain serenity of heart. To let go of anger, wrath, violence, and revenge are necessary conditions to living joyfully...”

When Jesus tells us to forgive seventy times seven it is because he wants to share with us the Joy of the Gospel. Peace comes from recognizing that God has freed us from an impossible debt by his generous and self-sacrificing love. Freed now from this debt we are called to go and do likewise with all we meet. This is the only way to true peace in our world.

May Jesus Christ be Praised!