

# Church of the Divine Love

Homily Sunday September 13, 2020

*Exodus 14: 19-31; Psalm 114; Romans 14: 1-12; Matthew 18: 21-35*

## **The power of forgiveness.**

Forgiveness is a hard virtue to gain and to maintain. We can feel the problem in the question Peter asks of Jesus today: “How many times must I forgive?” And although his proposal of “seven times” is used as a symbolic willingness to forgive “as much as it is humanly possible to forgive,” Jesus suggest we must go further still, since God forgives “seventy seven times”. Forgiveness is not a question of just how often or how many times, rather it reflects God’s unending willingness to pardon. There are no limits to his forgiveness. Our parable today shows that we are incapable of forgiving without first appreciating the forgiveness we have received from God.

First, we are insolvent, indebted, overdrawn in our account with God’s goodness. God has freely given us life, freedom, integrity, and hope. We are incapable of achieving anything by our own resources. “Without me you can do nothing.

Second, we are puffed-up with our own importance: “Pay me what you owe me!” We can be intolerant, demanding, inexcusable and arrogant. We can be unkind and unforgiving. We can injure our neighbor, and he can hurt us. We can so easily hold a grudge and refuse to forgive.

Third, the ultimate reality God’s goodness is never simple-minded. God is not blind. The unforgiving cannot be forgiven. Forgiveness only comes from realizing that we have been forgiven. In pardoning we are pardoned. Our tenuous hold on others must quickly be consumed not by following our hatred to the hilt, but by pardoning in gentle forgiveness. Only so can we realize the equation: Insolvency cannot make demands!

Today we stand at a difficult, seemingly impossible, place. We stand at the intersection of the nineteenth anniversary of the September 11 tragedy and today’s gospel. The memories, the images, the anger, the fear, the pain and losses all intersect with Jesus’s teaching on forgiveness. Both are real. Both are true. The deeper truth, however, is that we would still be standing at the same intersection

even if September 11 had never occurred. We stand at that place every day of our life. Look at the history of the world. Look at your own lives and you will find broken promises, hurt feelings, betrayals, harsh words, physical and emotional wounds. Every one of us could tell stories of being hurt or victimized by another. Everyone, I suspect, is in favor of forgiveness, at least in principle. Everyone, says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until there is something to forgive. What do we do then? What do we do when there is something to forgive? Some will strike back seeking revenge. Some will run away from life and relationships. Some will let the darkness paralyze them. I don't say that out of criticism or judgment of someone else but out of my own experience. I've done them all. I know how hard forgiveness can be. Like you, I too struggle with it and often avoid it. I also know that none of those answers are the way of Christ. All of them leave us stuck in the past, tied to the evil of another, and bereft of the future God wants to give us.

Forgiveness is the only way forward. That does not mean we forget, condone, or approve of what was done. It does not mean we ignore or excuse cruelty or injustice. It means we are released from them. We let go of the thoughts and fantasies of revenge. We look to the future rather than the past. We try to see and love as God sees and loves. Forgiveness is a way in which we align our life with God's life. To withhold forgiveness is to put ourselves in the place of God, the ultimate judge to whom all are accountable (Ro. 14:10, 12).

God's forgiveness and human forgiveness are integrally related. That is more than apparent in today's parable. The king forgives his slave an extraordinary amount. Ten thousand talents are about 3000 years of work at the ordinary daily wage. It seems there is no debt too large to be forgiven. This man, this debtor, was forgiven. That's what the kingdom of heaven is like. That's how our God is. This slave, however, refused to forgive his fellow slave 100 denarii, about three months of work at the ordinary daily wage. Too often that's what our world is like. Frequently, it is how we are. In that refusal the forgiven slave lost his own forgiveness.

This should not be news to us. We know it well. We acknowledge and pray it every Sunday and I'll bet most of you pray it every day. "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." We pray those words with ease and familiarity, but do we live our prayer? Do our actions support our request? "Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times." That's a lot of forgiveness but the pain of the world, our nation, and individuals is great. We need

to forgive as much, maybe more, for ourselves as for the one we forgive. Forgiving those who trespass against us is the salve that begins to heal our wounds. It may not change the one who hurt you, but I promise you this. Your life will be more alive, more grace-filled, more whole, more God-like for having forgiven another.

Forgiveness creates space for new life. Forgiveness is an act of hopefulness and resurrection for the one who forgives. It is the healing of our soul and life. Forgiveness takes us out of darkness into light, from death to life. It disentangles us from the evil of another. It is the refusal to let our future be determined by the past. It is the letting go of the thoughts, the hatred, the fear that fill us so that we might live and love again.

So how do we begin to forgive? There is no easy road to forgiveness. Forgiving another takes time and work. It is something we must practice every day. It begins with recognition and thanksgiving that we have been forgiven. We are the beneficiaries of the crucified one. Hanging between two thieves Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them” (Lk. 23:34). That is the cry of infinite forgiveness, a cry we are to echo in our own lives, in our families, our workplaces, our parishes, our day to day life.

Forgiveness is one of the most powerful responses that we could ever have, yet the steps in forgiving others may be difficult. Forgiving others is very hard. The love of Christ is the only way we can set free those who have deeply wounded us. The love of Christ gives us the only context we have for believing God has forgiven us. There is perhaps no greater gift you can offer God than a heart that knows the power of forgiveness and decides to set others free. Forgiving shows that the love, grace, and mercy of Jesus are operating in our lives. It is time to access this life-changing grace of forgiveness.

Is there someone who has offended you? Are you able to release the person in forgiveness? God gives us divine power to forgive. We who have received the freedom of forgiveness have the power to set one another free. This is a power that truly sets the captive free and can affect the whole world. Forgiveness defeats darkness on a massive scale because it involves the resurrection power of Jesus. Nothing can defeat the greatness and glory there is in one act of forgiveness.

How important it is that we seek forgiveness and offer forgiveness to one another. It is critical to our lives in every dimension—spiritually, physically, emotionally, and relationally. “Would you like to see the Lord shatter the spiritual prisons in your life, the areas where you feel trapped? Then forgive those who put

you there, for surely the walls of your imprisonment are made of your own anger and unforgiveness toward others.

**Amen!**