

9/11/2005

PENTECOST 17

MATT 18:21-35, A #19

Last week, in the Gospel for Mass, we had Jesus telling us how to resolve things with someone whom we thought had sinned against us. Today, we have Jesus going to the heart of the matter, whether or not things are resolved, whether or not the person sins against us again ... again ... again ... The heart of the matter is something called *forgiveness*.

And this heart of the matter is hard for us. It is hard enough to forgive someone once; Peter suggests a maximum of seven. But Jesus stretches Peter and us excruciatingly by saying that there are *no* limits to the forgiveness he expects us to live towards those by whom we are offended.

NO LIMITS! Peter's offer to forgive seven times meant there had to be a limit, for to Jews and Christians the number seven represents completion. But Jesus takes seven, multiplies it by itself, and then multiplies it by ten. That doesn't mean 490 times. It means **no limits**, because the number representing completion is multiplied by itself, then by 10, which represents **infinity**!

HARD! And the hardness of God's requirement that we be forgiving people is made harder still by the fact made clear in both our first reading and the gospel: the measure with which we mete out forgiveness will be the measure meted out to us by God. It is a simple spiritual principle: You can only receive *in* that which you give *out*, and in the same measure. Precious Lord, give us something to help us measure up!

I suggest to you the Lord has given us a number of things to help us grow and eventually measure up in this forgiveness business. And I'm going to remind you of several of them now.

First, God gets us clear on what forgiveness isn't, and what it is:

- 1 ***Forgiveness is NOT a feeling:*** Forgiveness has nothing to do with whether or not you are able to like the person. To forgive someone does not require your hurt, animosity, or anger to ameliorate towards the person nor does it require you to feel good, kindly, or sorry for him. **Get it:** forgiveness has nothing to do with your feelings.
- 2 ***Forgiveness does not require you to allow persons to get away with what they've done, not to confront them, or to become a doormat for them.*** You may forgive the thieves who broke into your house, but that doesn't mean you don't buy an alarm system. You may forgive the colleague who tried to hurt your career, but it does not follow that you should abandon all care and caution in dealing with her in the future. Forgiveness and wariness can coexist, you see.

And, when Jesus set out how we are to deal with those who sin against us, he made it clear that, if possible, offenses are to be dealt with head-on. Review last Sunday's gospel: Matthew 18:15-20. If we take Jesus at his word (which he expects us to), then we WILL confront those who offend us and do our part to work things out with them. Not doing so compounds the problem with two negatives: First, it allows resentment and bitterness to fester in us, as well as a false sense of how "good" we are that we simply bore it all! Second, not dealing with things takes away from the person who we think sinned against us the opportunity to change. Those two consequences only hurt the health of a community.

So, forgiveness is neither a matter of feeling okay about the person nor of allowing people to get away with what they've done. What forgiveness is, is an act of my will by which I will let it be God's problem to deal appropriately with the person who I think has wronged me. I will take vengeance neither into my hands, nor my mouth, nor my actions. Instead I will struggle ... and struggle it is ... to act charitably towards the person, not to give back to them what I think they have given to me, and to treat them as I would wish to be treated, whether I was a saint or a sinner, whether I was someone they adored or abhorred. In other words, I will treat them in accordance with who they and I are: people God loves and for whom he died ... **in spite of ourselves.**

What I've just said brings us to a second thing which helps us grow in this forgiveness business: the recognition of how much I myself am in need of being forgiven. What is it about us which allows each of us to give ourselves the "right" to get back at others for trespassing on our dignity ... and if not actively getting back at them, then passively doing so by refusing to live out forgiveness towards them? It is this: a false image of ourselves as somehow better, more virtuous, more moral, less petty than others.

But we are not! At root, we are all rebels against the God who has set us not in our own universe peopled with others to serve us, but in **his** universe, peopled with others, all of whom are called to serve one another mutually. Oh yes, in virtue and vice, there may be degrees of difference between us, but they are degrees of difference solely due to how much we have or have not grown in the grace of God.

How do we overcome this false view with which each of us walks through our day, that we are somehow better than others ... this false view which hinders our living forgiveness towards others? Ah, Jesus has provided us a way for beating down that monster: it's called the sacrament of reconciliation, *sacramental confession*. You can't receive that sacrament without doing a thorough examination of conscience. You have to go to God the Holy Spirit and say: "Okay, Lord, free me from my self-delusions and let me know myself even as you know me. Let me see myself in my everyday even as you have seen me. Then make me sorry for it all, so that, with your help, I will want to become better than I have been and do better than I have done."

That is a request pleasing to God. In your examination, you will see of yourself what he wants you to see. Through absolution, you will receive his grace to continue your struggle with sin, one of which is your sin of unforgiveness. If there is one thing I have clearly seen in those who regularly make their confession – regularly, not just once or twice a year – it is growth in beating down the monster of judgmentalness and self-righteousness which arises from that false view that we are somehow better than others. In the light of self-knowledge and empowered by God's grace, one grows into a more forgiving person. Who are we to deny to another that of which we are so in need?

And now a third aid to growth in this forgiveness business: ask Jesus for the grace to forgive. That seems a no-brainer, doesn't it? But how many of us, when faced with a difficulty, go first to the one who can aid us? I tend not to. I tend to go first to myself: "Dwight, this is what you've got to do. Do it." Many failures later, I may still be flailing on myself to do it.

But here it is: You and I do not have to dredge up forgiveness from our selves. We don't. Of our own, we have little to give, for our hearts are still in process of being enlarged from the smallness and disfigurement passed on to us by Adam and Eve.

But Jesus has an immeasurable supply of forgiveness to give, a supply contained within the treasury of his heart, that heart which he broke open for us upon the cross. **Ask him for it!** Ask him to fill your bitter, empty heart with the warm liquid of forgiveness in his, and then to tilt you over to pour it out upon another.

For now, there you have it, three aids for growth in this forgiveness-business:

- 1 A knowledge of what forgiveness isn't and what it is.
- 2 Sacramental confession, by which you move from that self-delusion of how much better you are than the ones who sin against you, and are strengthened in your efforts to forgive as you have been forgiven.
- 3 Asking Jesus early on to pour into you that forgiveness which flows from his heart upon us all.

Is it enough to do these things once, twice, seven times? No ... it will take your lifetime. But I can promise you this: before ever you reach the 490th time of making your confession and asking Jesus to fill you with his forgiveness, you will have become someone who is helping Jesus break that whole miserable, hellish cycle of unforgiveness which is too much the experience of this life for too many. And, at least through you, it will become for others whose life intersects with yours more as it is in heaven. Isn't that what you want for yourself?