

24th Sunday OT
Matthew 18:21-35

Forgiveness

The final and longest section of the **Community Discourse** in Matthew consists of a dialogue between Peter and Jesus on **forgiveness**, and the Parable of the Unforgiving Debtor. In the first part, Peter shows astonishing generosity by offering to forgive his brother seven times. But Jesus answers by demanding forgiveness for up to 77 times, an uncountable number. The figures remind the reader of the 77-fold vengeance threatened by Lamech in Genesis.

The Parable follows the Dialogue. This has elements of **savagery and humor**. The savagery reflects the pagan society of the day, in which wives and children were sold into slavery and debtors tortured. The humor arises from the pathetic promise of the debtor to repay all his debt, even though the amount concerned was ten times the annual income of Herod the Great.

But more important than the physical details are the **theological issues**. The debtor was pleasantly astonished to discover that the ruler did not run his affairs on the principle of justice alone. He allowed **mercy** to override its demands. The debtor did **not** follow his example. He insisted on justice in the case of the person in debt to him. Whatever Jesus meant by fulfilling every dot and title of the Law, **it is not this**.

Most people understand day to day forgiveness of small things and misunderstanding, especially between friends. However, it is the more **serious crimes** that the standard Christian phrase "Forgive and Forget" can be not only flippant but even insulting.

About two years ago a woman came to me for Spiritual Direction. **Spiritual Direction** is a way of accompanying someone on their spiritual journey mainly through listening. Once in a while the Spiritual Director offers insights, but only after having gotten to know the directee better. I warned her at the beginning that sometimes spiritual direction can be like boiling a large pot with lots of stuff at the bottom that will eventually come bubbling to the surface, and you may not like what you see but will have to eventually deal with it.

What came to the surface surprised even her, because she thought she had dealt with a certain issue in the past. And now it came back to her full force. The issue was the **violent murder** of her grandfather. For some reason, as a child, she was allowed to attend the trial of her beloved grandfather who was violently murdered by these two men. The description of how they killed him was so vivid that she could never forget it nor could she ever forgive them. At first, after the trial, she wasn't able to even speak for several months because of the shock of what these men had done to her grandfather.

She had been holding this anger inside herself all these years, which explained why she was always suffering physically, debilitating physical pain. That was over 50 years ago. She eventually realized that she was just as much **in a prison of her own making** from the hatred that she still felt for them in her heart as much as the **men who were behind bars**. She started to write about incident, which helped somewhat. But she realized that eventually she would have to forgive them from her heart face to face

There is a **program** that now exists that helps the process between relatives of the victim and the criminal/s. 60 Minutes aired a segment about just such a case where this woman could be put in contact with the men who were still serving their life sentences. One man refused, but the other was interested, and eventually she was able to meet at least that one man who was willing to meet her face to face. Their meeting was the beginning of both of their redemption, healing, and eventual loving relationship. Not surprising, such arrangements are very few, let alone successful.

Forgiveness **goes beyond** just cancelling someone's debt or overlooking a hurtful remark. The goal of true forgiveness hopes to restore a relationship between two people where love can begin and grow. How impossible that seems in a situation where the victim is a survivor of a violent crime. Every day we may come across situations where we have to forgive minor offenses, but every once in a while a family or community becomes what seems irreparably broken by violent crimes that are becoming more frequent, especially through random shootings.

And yet if love is the goal of every Christian in each and every relationship that we meet, no matter how casual, and grace is always acting, especially in the most

difficult and even tragic situations. May we never have to experience such tragic challenges to our acts of love for others as Christians, but may we also never forget the power in even the simple act of love for others we may not even know but meet each day and give our love.

It is only possible through an ***active faith community*** that we will be able to succeed in those special occasions where heroic love is demanded by members in such faith communities who have been there and done that, but also a faith community that will give us the reason for witnessing love for others in our day to day lives, since for Christians ***love*** should be like the air we breathe each and every moment of our lives.