

Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time 'Seventy Times Seven Times'

Grudges are satisfying while we're thinking about them, but they leave a horrible aftertaste. When we are done thinking over the offending issue, we're left with frustration and anger. The problem is that we think of how right we are in the moment, and we relish that feeling for as long as it lasts—until the crash afterwards. We may despise what we are holding onto, but can't resist holding onto it.

But we have something we need to contemplate in the reading from Sirach: "the vengeful will suffer our God's vengeance." The more we relish in the details of others sins against us, the more God will remember the details of our sins. If we don't let go of our anger, we'll spend our life tormenting ourselves with bitter feelings towards those who have harmed us.

St. Paul tells us that "no one lives for oneself, and no one dies for oneself" - at the end of the day, "we are God's own." We don't belong to ourselves—which means that nothing we have belongs to us, either.

Jesus tells of an unforgiving servant who has amassed a huge debt, and begs the king's forgiveness. The king grants him forgiveness, but the servant very quickly forgets how he has been forgiven. He forgets all about what he owes, and cares only about what he is owed. If this servant had taken a moment to really appreciate how his debt had been forgiven, he would not have treated others as he did.

It's amazing what information one can find on the internet: To put it all in perspective, here is what a 100 denarii and 10,000 talents look like in today's dollars. Currently, California's minimum wage is \$8.00 per hour. In Jesus' time we know that laborers worked 12 hours per day (72 hours per week). Under California law, they would be paid 40 hours a week at \$8 an hour and 32 hours of overtime at \$12 an hour for a weekly wage of \$704. Their annual wage, assuming they work 50 weeks, would be: \$704 per week x 50 weeks = \$35,200

So if 100 denarii equaled four months' salary, at current minimum wage, it would be equivalent to \$11,733.33. And if you continued to work as a day laborer earning 300 denarii each year, after 20 years, you will have earned 6,000 denarii (or 1 talent). And this servant owed 10,000 talents.

Earning \$35,200 per year at minimum wage, how much would you earn in 200,000 years to equal 10,000 talents? $\$35,200 \times 200,000 = \7.04 billion – which is approximately one-eighth of the total wealth of Bill Gates, the richest man in the U.S. and second richest in the world, with a net worth of \$53 billion. **If you had \$7.04 billion available to repay a debt, you would be the top 100 in the Forbes list of billionaires.**

This is a purposeful exaggeration to show us that there is no debt too large to be forgiven. We were bought by the death, and resurrection of Jesus. And the more we consider this, the more we can see what a price was paid for us. Others may have done us wrong, but

we're no angels ourselves. Any feeling that we somehow have a right to hold a grudge against another, should disappear when we think about how God could have held a grudge against us, but gave it up. We racked up a pretty substantial debt ourselves, and God not only forgave it, but raised us up sending Jesus. Given what has been done for us by God, we're not in the best position to complain about what has been done to us by humankind.

No matter how much of a debt someone else racks up against us, it will never really compare to the debt we racked up against God. Jesus tells Peter to "forgive not seven times but seventy-seven times." If we show mercy to others, God will show mercy to us. If we insist on treating offenses like a matter of accounting, God will take us to account. But God does not want that - God in Jesus wants to take our accounts, to on take the debts and the anger and grudges. Through Jesus' sacrifice, God not only set us free from worrying about any debt we might owe to God, but from worrying about any debt another might owe to us. If we remember what the Jesus has done for us, we can forgive and be set free.

As Christians, **we're called to encourage one another, to lift each other up and to trust that God is in control of every situation.** Forgiveness for Jesus is not a quantifiable event. It is a way of living, a way of loving, a way of relating, a way of thinking and seeing. If we are to follow Jesus then it must become our way. "Not seven times, but seventy-seven times."

Does that mean the drunk driver? The cheating spouse? The lying businessman? The racist? The rapist? The bully? The abusive parent? Even the terrorists of 9/11? Yes.

So, what do we do when there's something to forgive? Some of us may strike back seeking revenge. Some may run away from life and relationships. Some 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 struggle with it...I also know that none of those answers are Jesus' way. All of them leave us stuck in the past and far from the future God wants to give us.

Forgiveness is the only way forward. But it's also important to understand what forgiveness does not mean. It does not imply that a fault or sin doesn't matter. It doesn't mean that the offense is forgotten. It means freely choosing to overlook an offense because we are free to do so, having been loved and forgiven oneself. It doesn't mean we ignore or excuse cruelty or injustice. It means we let go of any thoughts of revenge. We try to see and love as God sees and loves.

The king forgives his servant an extraordinary amount. This man, this debtor, was forgiven. But he 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 one lost his own forgiveness.

This should not be news to us. We acknowledge and pray it every Sunday: "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.”

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

Forgiveness is the healing of our soul and life. Forgiveness takes us out of darkness into light; a 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.

There is no easy road to forgiveness – it’s something we must practice every day. It begins with recognition and thanksgiving that we have been forgiven.

The Psalmist reminds us: "Merciful and gracious is our God, slow to anger, abounding in mercy." Later he adds: "For as the heavens tower over the earth, so God’s mercy towers over those who fear God (meaning ‘are in awe of God’). As far as the east is from the west, so far has God removed our sins from us." These words tell us is that even though God has no need of mercy; God takes the initiative in showing graciousness and mercy to "those who fear revere the Divine nature of God."

How many times must we choose to forgive? How many times have we been hurt and suffered by the actions or words of another or has anger or fear controlled us? How many times has the thought of revenge filled us or have we replayed in our heads the argument with another? That’s how many times you choose, each choosing moving a step closer to forgiveness.

There can be no real Christian community without such an exchange of love. We should take great pains to be lenient and compassionate toward others rather than self-righteous and hard-hearted. Then we may look forward to meeting a lenient and compassionate divine judge when our own lives are evaluated.

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September 17, 2017

(excerpts from Fr Michael Marsh, Fr Edward Mazich, O.S.B., Fr Demetrius R. Dumm, O.S.B.)