

Homily: 22 Trinity

From the Second Lesson in the Gospel of Matthew,

“Then Peter came up and said to him, ‘Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.’”

We know that we are commanded to forgive “*seventy times seven*” times, but how do we do this when forgiving is so contrary to our nature. How, then, do we learn to forgive?? This was the quandary Peter expressed:

“Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?”

You can almost hear the frustration, the anger, the hurt, in Peter’s plaintive question. For Peter, as so often for us, this was not just a philosophical point of inquiry, but a real, personal, and painful question. We have all been there. Knowing we should forgive someone but having trouble finding the grace to do it.

From Peter’s tone we can imagine that he was troubled by some offense he held onto, and now realized he must forgive. Peter, like us, must have been troubled by what sometimes seems the unfairness of forgiving others for what we perceive as the wrongs they do to us.

Why is it so hard for us to forgive others? Part of the answer is that when we have been hurt, it is part of our fallen human nature to want to lash out and hurt the one who caused us pain in return. We want to make the one who hurt us pay for what he did to us. Sometimes we are angry because we have been rejected by others. We naturally seek the approval of others, and when we don't get that approval, we are hurt. We feel our worth is diminished, and we are ashamed.

But we must remember that vengeance is not ours to demand. In reality, those who attack us are usually acting out of their own pain and because they are weak or damaged. Unfortunately, it doesn't seem to help to know that they are broken when we want revenge. We are blinded by our lust to achieve our perceived justice.

Vengeance, however, is God's alone to take.

St. Paul says in his Epistle to the Romans,

“Beloved, never avenge ourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord,’”

A few short verses later He also says,

“if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

Our Lord tells us to forgive without reservation or limit.

“I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.”

Forgive, in other words, as much as there is to be forgiven. This is in accordance with what we pray in the Lord’s Prayer, in which we ask,

“Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

If we work hard to accept in our lives this way of God, we too can be forgiven.

We know our Lord’s forgiveness knows no bounds, therefore, neither should our forgiveness know any limits.

It is also important, to remember that we should not try to keep count of the offenses against us. Doing so would imply that we are only waiting for some arbitrary limit to be reached before we will finally have had enough and can finally strike out at our tormenters.

Everyone has a breaking point, a limit to what they perceive they can take. This is where the concept of forgiveness resides in the head, in our emotions and our impulsive nature.

No, our forgiveness must be from the heart, not given grudgingly and with reservations, but offered freely and without measure, just as God offers his forgiveness freely and without limit to us. We cannot hold back some secret desire for eventual revenge, as much as we would sometimes like to. Instead, we must honestly seek the welfare of those who have injured us.

If we do not offer forgiveness freely and without reservation, then we place ourselves in the position of the debtor in Jesus' parable. The debtor asked forgiveness from his master, which was granted, but then he who had been forgiven a huge debt refused to forgive the man who owed him, even though the debt he himself owed far exceeded what the other man owed him.

Just as the debtor could not pay his debts, neither can we pay our debt of sin to God. We are, as it were, bankrupt in sin. Except for the merciful forgiveness of God, we would face justice. As we are cautioned, if we fail to forgive others, then our own debt of sin will be held against us.

In the same way that the master, on hearing that the man for whom he had forgiven, has refused to forgive others,

returned and punished that man, so will God hold us accountable for our debts if we refuse to forgive the debts of others.

All of which finally returns us to the original question: How do we learn to forgive?

First, we need to realize that we are forgiven children of God. We have been forgiven. God has told us that we are His eternally. Nothing that anyone can say or do can change that. When we remember whose we are then the attacks of others against us pale to insignificance in comparison. Suddenly, the words and actions of others, which seemed so troubling before, shrink to nothingness.

Second, we must understand that those who attack us are themselves damaged and weak. Remember that Jesus forgave all, even those who were crucifying Him as He hung there on the Cross. We have the greatest teacher and example there ever could be.

Third, we must remember that as we forgive others, we open the door to our own healing. When we hold grudges, anger, and bitterness against others within us, those feelings become a cancer on our very soul.

When we honestly forgive the anger, the bitterness, and the resentment we hold towards the ones who hurt us we are able to lance the festering wound and permit the healing grace of God to enter in, to purify and to heal us.

When we forgive, it is as if we have allowed God to apply the healing salve to our wound and we can ourselves then begin to heal.

So, once again, how do we learn to forgive? We learn to forgive by realizing that in forgiving others, we not only make it possible for us to be forgiven ourselves, but we also permit ourselves to be healed. For our own good as well as the good of those who we forgive for having harmed us, we must always work hard to have a heart of forgiveness. We forgive others because that is the pathway to God.

The Lord be with you,

Let us pray.

Dear Lord, upon whose forgiveness we depend for our life and our salvation, teach us to forgive others, as we ourselves have been forgiven by You. Let us be guided always by Your loving example of forgiving even those who crucified You. Help us to let go of pride, anger, and resentment, and hold fast instead to humility, love, and grace in trying always to follow You. This we ask through our only Mediator and Advocate, Jesus Christ. *Amen.*