

September 13, 2020 B
24th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Sirach 27:30-28:7

Psalms 103:1-2, 3-4, 9-10, 11-12

Romans 14:7-9

Matthew 18:21-35

This morning's Scripture readings lend themselves quickly to the predominate theme of forgiveness, a lesson that I am sure all of us could use some encouragement with. Referencing today's Gospel reading, it would be reasonable to assume that something must have been bothering Peter when he asked, "Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive? As many as seven times?"

Jewish tradition held that a man was obligated to forgive his neighbor three times; but, if he offended you the fourth time – game on - you could let him have it for all it was worth. So Peter may have thought all his bases were covered when he questioned the Lord, "how often must I forgive?" - How about if I forgive him three times, and again three more times, and then finally what if I even add in an extra forgiveness for good measure?

Think about it, how many times have we been in the same place? Why do I always have to be the one who forgives? Why can't I just lambaste them, and then write them off for good? Didn't the Apostle Paul say if possible live peacefully with all men? Indeed, isn't it amazing how we can twist God's Word around to fit our own agenda when we feel the need to be right?

However Jesus had other plans for us when He answered, "I say to you, not seven times but seventy-seven times." Here some Greek scholars even suggest He actually implied that we ought to forgive seven times seventy or 490 times, - a figure of speech suggesting

that as long as a brother or a sister offends you, it would be in our best interest to keep on forgiving them.

Lets face it - forgiveness is not an easy task to engage let alone master; yet the opportunities to forgive present themselves ad - infinitum each and every day. Therefore we need all the help we can muster to navigate the straits of bitterness and resentment, hence one reason the lectionary reading directs our attention to the book of Sirach.

Written by a Jewish scribe by the name of Jesus *ben* Sirach of Jerusalem around 175 BC, the Book of Sirach was not maintained in the Hebrew Jewish Bible because of technical reasons and not for its lack of authenticity or lack of wisdom.

Accepted as biblically canonical by the Early Church, as well as present day Roman & Old Catholics, Eastern Orthodox Catholics, and the Occidental Catholic Church, the early Greek Church Fathers called *Sirach* the book of *All Virtuous Wisdom* and thus it was placed in the original Canon of the Bible. Needless to say, whether or not one considers the Book of Sirach canonical or not, true biblical scholarship will never deny the benefits that can be gleaned from its common sense examples and wisdom.

Notable in our text today is the necessity of treating others justly. Here biblical scholar and author Dianne Bergant brings our attention to Sirach's basic formulation of the Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." She also points out the passage contains early references to the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive as we forgive others." Finally, we are here reminded that God will ultimately bring divine justice to all at the close of the ages.

From the very beginning of recorded time, mankind has been reminded with the need to forgive. God set the example. He forgave Adam and Eve for disobeying Him by allowing them to live, albeit away from His physical presence they would have to wait to be washed in the precious blood of an innocent lamb before they could once again see Him face to face.

I have often wondered how Adam was able to forgive Eve for taking the forbidden fruit? Together, how were they able to forgive Cain for killing their second born son? Here we notice that the gift forgiveness was already at work. God blessed them with a son named Seth. Through the lineage of this man Seth the Lord Jesus Christ would eventually be born to forgive and redeem the whole world.

I know we've already stated that all of us have at one time or another struggled with forgiveness. Along the same line of thinking I cannot help but wonder, which is harder - to extend forgiveness or to receive forgiveness. Author Richard Lovelace actually addresses this very issue in his outstanding book, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal*,

“It is often said today . . . that we must love ourselves before we can be set free to love others. This is certainly the release we must seek to give our people. But no realistic human being finds it easy to love or to forgive themselves, and hence their self-acceptance must be grounded in their awareness that God accepts them in Christ. . . . There is endless talk about this in the Church, but little apparent belief in it among Christians, although they may have a conscious complacency that conceals the subconscious despair which Kierkegaard called “the sickness unto death.”

More on Kierkegaard later, but for now - the point the author is making here is that to live life to the fullest we must hold to a firm belief and conviction that God truly loves us. To fail in this arena leaves us wide open to spiritual sickness and stagnation. Oh, we may know and even claim some of the spiritual medicines contained in the Word and the Sacraments, yet still remain spiritually, and sometimes even emotionally and physically emaciated.

To that point Lovelace suggests that the conviction that God loves us is woefully lacking in many segments of the church today. How so you may ask? For starters let me ask you, - do you believe God loves you? Dare I ask for a show of hands? Well then, on the other hand, do you think God likes you? You don't have to raise your hands.

More times than not -folks will readily state that God does indeed love them, yet hesitate when asked, Does God like you? Not only must we forgive others, but we must also forgive ourselves. When we do not forgive, we fall victim to "a sickness unto death."

Coined by Soren Kierkegaard a Danish theologian who was born in 1813 wrote that a "sickness unto death" results in despair. According to Kierkegaard, an individual is "in despair" if he/she does not align himself with God or God's plans for him or her self.

Time prohibits exploring Kierkegaard's philosophy and theology; yet we need to mention that one of his major contributions to the modern world of philosophy and theology was his insistence that each person must recognize God's plan to prevent despair. To that end it has been said,

Kierkegaard's cure for this soul sickness is being reconciled to God through God's grace and mercy found in Jesus Christ. In [his] work he attempts to present the Christian faith as it was originally intended. He focused on Christ's incarnation as the great paradox—God in the flesh, God in time, the infinite uncovered in the finite.¹

Indeed one might ask, so what is God's plan for the human self? To this question Jesus *ben* Sirach might reply,

Forgive your neighbors' injustice; then when you pray, your own sins will be forgiven. Could anyone nourish anger against another and expect healing from the Lord? Could anyone refuse mercy to another like himself, can he seek pardon for his own sins? Think of the commandments, hate not your neighbor; remember the Most High's covenant, and overlook faults.

I think most of us would agree, if we were honest, that when we do not forgive ourselves and or extend forgiveness to another an immediate awareness of despair accompanies that refusal. There is something deep within the heart of the Christian that senses something has gone awry. Despair seems to creep slowly into the heart filling the spaces left vacant from the fleeting peace of knowing that it would be best to choose to forgive.

Sirach writes, "Wrath and anger are hateful things, yet the sinner hugs them tight. The vengeful will suffer the Lord's vengeance, for He remembers their sins in detail."

¹ <http://www.reasons.org/blogs/reflections/christian-thinkers-101-a-crash-course-on-soren-kierkegaard>

“He remembers their sins in detail.” Now here some will ask, does that mean that God will not forgive us unless we forgive one another? What about our sins being tossed into the deep sea with a no fishing sign posted? I thought we were forgiven when we were baptized into Christ - just read Romans 6?

Yes St Paul did say we are baptized into His death and raised with Him in new life, and yes we are forgiven, but there is certainly a whole lot more to discipleship and spiritual formation than the initiation rite of baptism.

What did Jesus say about the matter of forgiveness? In Matthew 6:14-15 Jesus said,

For if you forgive men their sins or trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But, and here is that word again but, but, if you do not forgive men their sins or trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses (see Matt. 18:35; James 2:13).

Here we might notice the Gospel reading ended with verse 34, however and often left out of postmodern preaching texts this is what verse 35 states, “So my heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses.”

In closing, undoubtedly, Jesus’ response to Peter’s question, “how often must I forgive my brother?” reminds us of the seriousness of learning how to forgive. If you are unwilling to forgive those who owe you, whatever it may be that they owe, the consequences of your inability to forgive will cost you greatly.

To illustrate the seriousness of the matter Jesus warned that the master turned the unforgiving servant over to the torturers until he should pay back the whole debt.

So then, what charge can we take home with us from today's homily? St. Paul's letter to the Church at Ephesus is clear, "Be angry but do not sin, do not let the sun set on your anger, and do not leave room for the devil" (Eph. 4:26-7).

Unfortunately, when we fail to forgive, we give Satan legal right to carry out from deep within our souls any number of treasonous acts against God. Plus it's almost as if we give the devil legal license to torment us when we fail to forgive.

Finally, it has also been said, "unforgiveness is like an acid; it does more damage to the object in which it is stored than the object on which it is poured."

Therefore may we ask the Holy Spirit to free us from any desire to withhold forgiveness from those who have sinned or trespassed against us?

Hence we are encouraged to lay any and all offenses on the Altar, and let the Power of the Holy Spirit transform those hurts into forgiveness and peace.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.