

24th Sunday of Ordinary Time “To Both Forgive and to Love”

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This Sunday always reminds me of 9/11 back in 2001. The reason for that is because the Sunday that followed 9/11 was also the 24th Sunday of Ordinary Time Cycle A, same as this weekend, with the same readings, calling us to forgive. That was a really, really, hard Sunday as many of us remember, and the Gospel reading made that weekend even harder in some respects. It was good medicine though, very good medicine. And yet, these reading also seem very applicable to the times we live in today.

I don't know about you, but for me it just feels like everyone around us is angry about something. Spouses and family members are arguing with each other over whatever is being talked about on the cable news channel. When there is bad weather, politicians blame each other for it. There is a lot going on in our country and world today. It can be overwhelming at times.

Whenever we find ourselves feeling angry about something going on, we can probably find a reason to be justified for it (at least from our perspective). However, do you know what is missing in all the energy we spend with being angry about this, that, or the other thing? Love. Love is what's missing. There is a real deficit of love in our country and world today, and that is a bigger problem in my mind than anything else we can identify.

Our first reading from Sirach says it, right? “Wrath and anger are hateful things, yet the sinner hugs them tight.” Now, isn't that the truth? In our Gospel reading, Peter asks Jesus, “Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus answers, “I say to you, not seven times but seventy-seven times”. This is hard medicine to swallow. It is good medicine though. We all need it.

Of course, the commandment to forgive doesn't mean that we don't protect ourselves and our family members or seek justice when injustice happens. The commandment to forgive however does demand that we do so in a spirit of Christian love, even if it is a tough love. If we are feeling persecuted by someone right now, we must still love them as hard as that is. Even when we don't feel like loving our enemies, we must find a way to choose to love them as Christ loves us. What does that look like? Love looks like, at the very least, praying for our enemy's conversion of heart. Love also looks like praying for their salvation. That is what God wants. Why don't we?

However, as much as we can get riled up by what we see going on in the world today, in my experience the people who really hurt us in this life aren't the faces we see on television. The people who really hurt us, who sincerely challenge our ability to forgive, are usually the people who are closest to us,

perhaps at work, perhaps at home, people who we thought cared for us, and the people who we thought loved us. Those are the people who can hurt us the most. And when they do, it really hurts, and we can be tempted to carry anger and resentment forever.

What does wrath and anger eventually do to us though? If we let it, anger and wrath will eventually eat a hole through our stomach and compromise our health. In time, anger and wrath will even eat a hole through our soul. How is that good for us or for anybody? And so, Jesus suggests something extremely radical. He suggests forgiveness. That's the medicine we need right now. Forgiveness.

Again, forgiveness doesn't mean that we don't seek justice that is objectively fair for the circumstance. Forgiveness doesn't mean that we necessarily restore trust to someone either until that trust is earned. Forgiveness does mean that we make the effort to see the people who have wronged us with Jesus' eyes. Jesus died on the cross for everyone, not just me. Forgiveness means praying for the salvation for those who wronged me. And if we find that too difficult, we need to pray for the grace to pray for our enemy's salvation. Why is that? St. Paul answers that question in our second reading, "None of us lives for oneself...we live for the Lord". We live for the Lord!

And so, who are the people we need to forgive seventy-seven times? Who are those people in our lives who have hurt us, who cause us to brood over injury day after day? We can ask ourselves: are we better off harboring that pain day in and day out or are we better off just letting God be God? Let him sort it out. Furthermore, are we better off blaming somebody else for the misery we carry around everywhere we go, or do we dare recognize the truth: that we are ultimately responsible for our own happiness or unhappiness in life?

The biggest obstacle to forgiveness of course is our egos. The devil's greatest ally is our pride. The only way to beat the devil is with love. And Jesus shows us how. We would do well to follow the Lord's example of what it means to love God and love our neighbor. This is because when everything else is said and done: news channels, politicians cannot save us. Only Jesus knows the path to eternal life.