

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Forgiveness is a Christian virtue and is the hallmark of our Christian faith and practice. Forgiving the other in the full sense is a form of loving and caring. It is the miracle of a new beginning. It is to start where we are, not where we wish we were, or the other person was. It is to hold out a hand; to want to renew a friendship; to want a new relationship with husband, father, daughter, friend, or indeed enemy.

It may not take away the hurt and it does not deny the past injury. It does not ignore the possibility and need for repentance and a change in the relationship. It means being willing to take the initiative in dealing with any barriers that I may be raising towards a restored relationship. It means that I am willing to have a relationship with the other person that is based on Christian love and not on what has happened in the past, if the response of the other person makes that possible. Christ from the cross showed what forgiveness is and how far we can go.

Jesus taught his disciples how it is necessary for them ever to be ready to forgive their fellowmen who injured them. Today's Gospel opens with one of Peter's straight forward questions, asking the Lord how often he ought to forgive. If he forgives seven times was it sufficient. According to the rabbinical tradition forgiveness apparently extends to three offences and the fourth offence calls for punishment. Good hearted Peter doubles the forgiveness of the rabbis and adds one for good measure and considers himself very generous. To his surprise Jesus is not impressed and tells him that it is not seven but seventy seven. Luke makes it further more difficult to count saying seventy times seven. In other words you may not attach a number, a limit, to the times you forgive.

There are two remarkable benefits that come from forgiving. First benefit touches us who forgive: If you forgive others their wrong doing, the heavenly Father will also forgive us. The second benefit accrues those we forgive: we can be an instrument of God's grace to others, help to make them better than they are. Today Christ applies the lesson of the parable to his disciples telling them that if they do not forgive the other from their heart they will not receive the forgiveness from God.

There are two different approaches to offence and forgiveness, to reconciliation. One approach is human approach where we expect the person to repent the wrong done, apologize the other for it and repair the injury. Finally receive the pardon for the same. The other is the Christian understanding of reconciliation, where we see how freely God has forgiven us and the grace of forgiveness given to us. Inspired by the divine forgiveness, we repent and also extend the forgiveness to the other. Here reconciliation does not begin with the offender but with the victim. God will forgive the soul that forgives others. God will welcome the return of such a child into the Body of Christ to continue its sanctification. The Holy Spirit will once more dwell within the body of the repentant individual. God will bless the person with numerous graces, this being God's way of rejoicing in this great moment.

Once two brothers, who lived on adjoining farms, fell into conflict. Then the long collaboration fell apart. It began with a small misunderstanding and it grew into a major difference, and finally it exploded into an exchange of bitter words followed by weeks of silence. One morning there was a knock on John's door. He opened it to find a carpenter looking for a job. The older brother said "I do have a job for you." Showing his brother's farm he said, Last week there was a meadow between us and he took his bulldozer and has made a creek between us. Well, he may have done this to spite me and I want you to build me a fence an 8-foot fence so I won't need to see his place or his face anymore." The carpenter said, "I think I understand the situation. Give me the material and I will do the needful."

The older brother had to go to town. The carpenter worked hard all day. About sunset when the farmer returned, his eyes opened wide, his jaw dropped. There was no fence there at all. It was a bridge stretching from one side of the creek to the other! A fine piece of work, handrails and all and, his younger brother was coming toward them, his hand outstretched. "You are quite a fellow to build this bridge after all I've said and done." The two brothers stood at each end of the bridge, and embraced each other. They turned to see the carpenter hoist his toolbox onto his shoulder. "No, wait! Stay a few days. I've a lot of other projects for you," said the older brother. "I'd love to stay on," the carpenter said, but I have many more bridges to build.