

Year A 24th Sun OT

What I have failed to do

Mt 18:21-35

Thomas Fleming writes of his father who, back in the 1900s in Jersey City, had to go to work right out of grammar school. He worked in a watch factory, owned by the ruling Blaine family, right next door to his home. It was dull, monotonous work but it paid a dollar a day, good money back then. His father told him, "Each morning they opened the doors and we filed in one by one. Sitting there behind a desk would be an old high-collared clerk. You'd get in front of the desk and he'd ask you: 'Protestant or Catholic?' If anyone answered 'Catholic' he was told, 'No openings today.' If you said 'Protestant' you were handed a slip and told to report to a certain section for work. Like many other immigrant Catholics in the line, I gritted my teeth and said 'Protestant' —we needed the buck that badly."

The Blaines and their like held the social and political dominance in Jersey City with a vengeance. Gradually, in a long and bitter battle at the ballot box, people like Fleming's father joined forces with Frank Hague in the 1920s to eventually unseat them. The 1929 crash sealed the defeat of the old Protestant guard and many were reduced to poverty, including old Mr. Blaine's son. One day, writes Fleming, in 1940 a man in a frayed coat with stains on it came up the icy walk to their house to see his father. His father came downstairs, held out his hand, and said, "Nice to see you, Mr. Blaine. What can I do for you?" "Mr. Fleming, I need a job. I don't know whether you can help me. I don't know whether you *will* help me. I know my family hasn't been on your side politically."

Fleming writes, "There was silence for a moment. Here, if ever, was the perfect moment for revenge. How easily my father could even the score for those days of humiliation in the watch factory by throwing the man out of our house. And in this same moment ... I realized that I wanted him to do just that. In the most savage, burning way I wanted to savor the taste of revenge.

Now ask him, 'Protestant or Catholic?' I wanted to scream. Instead, my father's voice came up to me steady and calm. "What kind of work can you do, Mr. Blaine?" Fleming goes on to tell about his father's promise to help the man. He ends his story with these words, "Mr. Blaine disappeared into the windy night. I sat

on the stairs, thinking of those ragged lines filing into the watch factory each morning to accept their humiliation-----They were a part of history now.. .. With five minutes of matter-of-fact kindness my father had healed the wound, and proved to me the ready power of his quiet faith. "

A lovely story of forgiveness, the very theme of today's gospel. But I would like to stretch that theme beyond the usual need to forgive what has been done **to the need to forgive what has not been done**. In other words, to talk in terms of forgiveness of our sins of omission. As our Confiteor at the beginning of Mass proclaimed, "for what we have done and for what we have failed to do." There are two omissions in particular that I have in mind: **the omission of charity and the omission of honor**. Both need deep forgiveness. And so, in a kind of examination of conscience, let me illustrate each of these needs by a story. One is a classic tale that you know so well and the other is not, but has its powerful point.

The classic tale is Oscar Wilde's *The Happy Prince*. You will recall that the happy prince is nothing more than an exquisite statue gilded over with gold leaf standing on a pedestal high above the city. He looked down upon it with his blue sapphire eyes and guarded his domain with his sword in which was embedded a priceless ruby. One night a small lost swallow landed wearily at the prince's feet to rest. But before he could fall asleep, he felt a cascade of water pouring down on him. He looked up and saw that it was the happy prince crying. For the prince could see from his lofty perch a sick child begging his mother for an orange while his poor mother worked with bleeding fingers embroidering the gown of a rich woman. "Swallow," said the prince, "please stay with me. Stay with me tonight and be my messenger. The boy is so thirsty and the mother is so sad." The bird agreed and, following the prince's instructions, took the ruby from the sword and dropped it on the table next to the thimble of the woman. The next day the prince saw a young writer in his garret which was so cold that his fingers were frozen and he could not write to finish his play. So the happy prince had the swallow pluck out one of his sapphire eyes and fly it to the young playwright. The next day it was a little match girl whose matches had fallen into the water. She would sell none and her father would beat her severely. Again, the prince had the swallow bring his other sapphire eye to her.

At this point the swallow knew that he could not leave the sightless prince alone and so he stayed to act as his eyes and to pull off, one by one, the gold leaf from his body to bring them to all those who were hurting. Finally, one freezing day, the prince was completely stripped of all his riches. He had given everything—his ruby, his sapphires, his gold leaf. The swallow, too, had given his all. The bitter cold that he should have left long ago, got to him. In a last effort he flew up to the prince's lips, kissed them, and fell dead at his feet. At that moment, the leaden heart of the happy prince snapped in two.

Finally, the townspeople, disgusted at the eyesore that the statue had become, tore it down and melted it in a blast furnace. But the broken lead heart refused to melt, so the townspeople picked it up and tossed it beside the body of the dead swallow.

Looking down on earth, God said to one of his angels, "Bring me the two most precious things in that city." The angel returned with the leaden heart and the dead swallow. "You have rightly chosen," said God, "for in my garden of Paradise the little bird shall sing forevermore, and in my city of gold, the happy prince shall praise me."

For the charity deferred, O Lord, forgive me.

For the heroism denied, O Lord, forgive me.

For seeing, but not acting, O Lord, forgive me.

My second story concerns an incident during World War II where a young sailor struck up a pen pal relationship with a woman he had never met. The way it happened was that one day he was in the library getting a book when he noticed that there were pencil notations in the margin. And they were so deep and loving that he decided then and there that he would have to meet the person who wrote such beautiful thoughts. He went to the librarian and got the name of the woman who had written those lovely words. The day after his introductory letter to her as pen pal he was shipped overseas. But for the next year the two corresponded regularly back and forth, exchanging a great deal of pleasure in revealing their deepest thoughts. At different times the sailor asked for a picture of his correspondent but he never received one. But still, their feelings for each other

grew.

It was finally time for him to return to the United States. He and his pen pal decided they would meet at seven o'clock and a rendezvous was arranged for Grand Central Station. How would he know her? She wrote back that he would know her by the red rose that she would wear in her lapel. Well, shortly after entering the station, a tall, beautiful blonde, in a pale green suit, sauntered by. Almost magnetically, the lonely young man was drawn toward this woman and her alluring vitality and sensuality. She smiled at him and even murmured, "Going my way, sailor?" as she passed by. But her spell over him was broken when he suddenly saw behind her a woman wearing a red rose in her lapel. His heart sank because she was as plain as the blonde had been stunning. She was fortyish, roundish, grayish, but with two sparkling eyes in a gentle face. As the blonde walked away, the young sailor hesitated for a moment, but then turned his back on her beauty and strode over to the simple woman who was wearing the red rose in her lapel.

Looking at her, he faced the disappointed realization that their relationship could never really be a romantic one. And yet, on the other hand, he was buoyed by the memory of their letters and of the prospect of having at least a lifelong friend, one whose wit and spirituality and intelligence he already knew from their correspondence. And so, the young sailor introduced himself and suggested that they go out to dinner. But the woman just smiled at him with amusement and told him, "I don't know what this is all about, son, but the young lady in the green suit who just went by begged me to wear this rose on my coat. And she said that if you were to ask me out to dinner, she's waiting for you in the restaurant across the street. She said it was some kind of a test."

For the honor not kept, O Lord, forgive me.

For the distractions rooted in selfishness, O Lord, forgive me.

For the embracing of glitz over substance, O Lord, forgive me.