



Things to Ponder

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Homily – Gospel of Matthew 18:21-35

Introduction: Breaking the Resentment Barrier

Today's Gospel reading directly follows last week's Gospel in which Jesus taught the disciples how to handle disputes and conflict within the Christian community. (With respect and dignity for the person coupled with a search for a consensus.)

In this weekend's Gospel, Peter asks Jesus how many times one ought to extend forgiveness to another. Peter proposes a reasonable number of times. Perhaps seven. (In the rabbinical tradition, a person was required to forgive a person three times.) So, in effect, Peter is more than "doubling the forgiveness number." But Jesus surprisingly replies by extending Peter's proposal by an enormous amount – not just seven times should a person forgive, but 77 times. (Some commentaries even suggest Jesus meant "seventy-seven times" – $70 \times 7 = 490$ times! The Greek is unclear.)

The parable of the unforgiving servant in the Gospel passage is Jesus' elaboration of his initial reply to Peter. Through the parable, we come to understand the depths of God's mercy toward us and the results of our acceptance of God's forgiveness. In brief, the king in the parable decides to settle accounts with his servants. We are told that one servant in particular owes the king an enormous sum of money. The king is moved by the humility of the pleading servant and mercifully forgives the debt. But, rather than displaying gratitude, the servant confronts a fellow servant who owes him a small debt. The unmerciful servant refuses the pleas of his fellow servant and sends the servant to jail.

In the final act of this story, a few other servants tell the merciful king about the actions of the unforgiving servant. The king punishes the servant because he refused to show mercy also. The parable concludes with these memorable words:

"So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives your brother from your heart."

I would invite you to take time to read and ponder the words from the Gospel of Matthew 18: 21-35. This is a simple story but with a wallop!

- What word or words caught your attention?
- What in this passage comforted you?
- What in this passage challenged you?

What grudges are you holding? Name them.
Is there anyone you have shut out of your life?
Name that person. What can you do?

Further Questions and Reflections:

This is an extremely difficult Gospel passage, because it demands so much from us! Forgive? Forgive that person who hurt us—or our family/friends—so deeply? How is such humanly possible? I believe this passage is calling us (perhaps kicking and screaming along the way) to throw away the calculator when dealing with relationships.

Forgiving is an endless task, not a “number’s game.”

We all love to be forgiven. We expect it and want it. But we find it a struggle to forgive. We resist – and even refuse oftentimes to do it. Why is that?

In this Gospel, Jesus is saying that forgiveness is possible because we have been forgiven. Do we follow Jesus’ example in forgiving others?

Jesus is telling us that forgiveness occurs when we stop saying, “Look what you’re doing to me,” and start saying, “What can I do to relieve your hurt?”

Are we concerned with the other or just ourselves?

Forgiveness is something very creative. For it means pardoning and letting go completely, creating and making the offending person new again. A rebirth in a relationship? It requires great grace to forgive. We are called to forgive and go on forgiving. It means letting go of our treasured grievances—and letting go of past baggage—and moving (often gradually) from resentment to glorious freedom.

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