

15th SUNDAY after PENTECOST SERMON: Matthew 18:21-35

Last Sunday's Gospel talked about how we, as followers of Christ, are to relate to one another in community especially how to handle conflicts. Remember those three key words that reminded us what to do in times disagreement and conflict: DISCIPLINE, RECONCILIATION and FORGIVENESS.

This Sunday's Gospel continues the theme of FORGIVENESS clearly presented in the opening scene of the reading when, *having approached, Peter said to HIM, "Lord, how often can my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?"*

In the Jewish context at the time of Jesus, the number "seven" represented fullness and completion (as creation was completed in 7 days). For Peter, the number "seven" was a good number. It was a reasonable number of times the victim could forgive the wrongdoer.

Jesus responded with a word play on the number seven: *22 JESUS said to him, "I say to you, not up to seven times, but seven times seventy."* Here, the number represented an uncountable number of times. Jesus' point was clear. Forgiveness was not a matter of quantity – of numbers. Forgiveness is a quality --- a quality of the heart – a heart always ready to forgive others. It means to forgive always. One must always forgive.

To place forgiveness in context, Jesus told a parable about a king who settled accounts with his officials/servants. One official owed 10,000 talents -- **an unheard amount of money, so an enormous debt**. He begged for mercy when he could not repay the debt. The King forgave him. But when the official left the court he throttled and threw in prison a co-worker who owed him 100 "denarii" ... an amount of one hundred days wages ... **a small amount of debt in comparison**. So, when the king heard of the official's lack of mercy, he condemned the official to torture in jail. [18:23-34]

We can readily understand the symbolism in the parable. The king is the image of God who loves us with a love that is so rich in mercy as to welcome us, love us and forgive us continuously. The ungrateful official is any of us in community – in a family, in a church, in a society.

Let us therefore remember this teaching on forgiveness: God, our Father is boundless in mercy. He forgives us all our faults as soon as we show even just a small sign of repentance. This is how God is to us: merciful.

So, when we are tempted to close our heart to those who have offended us and ask us for forgiveness, let us remember our merciful Father's words to the wicked servant: *"I forgave you all that debt because you besought me; and should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?" (vv. 32-33)*. Remember that if we have experienced the peace and joy which come from being forgiven, we should also open ourselves to forgiving in turn.

This is what Jesus taught us to pray in the Our Father. He connects the forgiveness which we ask from God with the forgiveness that we give to our brothers and sisters: ***“And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Mt 6:12).*** God’s forgiveness is the symbol of his immeasurable love for each of us and he wants to offer it to us, but he cannot do so if we close our heart to love towards others.

Let us never forget that: if we refuse to forgive, then we will not be forgiven.

But let us always remember that: God grants to every one of us the grace to be able to transmit to others the precious gift of forgiveness, which we can do with a simple word, or even a little smile.

FORGIVENESS that comes from a loving and merciful heart is the mark of a true disciple. The concrete applications are these:

During this difficult time of the corona virus pandemic, any help and concern that we show to one another and to those in need, should come from a merciful and loving heart.

During this time of racial unrest and conflicts, our responses and interventions should always come from a loving and merciful heart.

During this period of contentious election, when one side hurls vindictiveness to the other side, let our actions and decisions always come from a loving and merciful heart.

These are the many faces of forgiveness. These are the many faces of a loving and merciful heart. Amen.