

Twenty Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Sunday, September 17, 2023

THE LAST WISH!

A dying man gathered his Lawyer, Doctor, and Clergyman at his bedside and handed each of them an envelope containing \$25,000 in cash. He made them each promise that after his death and during his repose, they would place the three envelopes in his coffin. He told them that he wanted to have enough money to enjoy the next life. A week later the man died.

At the Wake, the Lawyer and Doctor and Clergyman, each concealed an envelope in the coffin and bid their old client and friend farewell.

By chance, these three met several months later. Soon the Clergyman, feeling guilty, blurted out a confession saying that there was only \$10,000 in the envelope he placed in the coffin. He felt, rather than waste all the money, he would send it to a Mission in South America. He asked for their forgiveness.

The Doctor, moved by the gentle Clergyman's sincerity, confessed that he too had kept some of the money for a worthy medical charity. The envelope, he admitted, had only \$8000 in it. He said, he too could not bring himself to waste the money so frivolously when it could be used to benefit others.

By this time the Lawyer was seething with self-righteous outrage. He expressed his deep disappointment in the felonious behavior of two of his oldest and most trusted friends. I am the only one who kept his promise to our dying friend.

I want you both to know that the envelope I placed in the coffin contained the full amount. I put in my personal check for the full \$25,000.

BAD BIRD

David received a parrot for his birthday. The parrot was fully grown with a bad attitude and worse vocabulary. Every other word was an obscenity. Those that weren't expletives, were to say the least, rude.

David tried hard to change the bird's attitude and was constantly saying polite words, playing soft music, anything he could think of. Nothing worked. He yelled at the bird and the bird yelled back. He shocked the bird and the bird just got more angry and more rude.

Finally, in a moment of desperation, David put the bird in the freezer, just for a few moments. He heard the bird squawk and kick and scream—then suddenly, there was quiet.

David was frightened that he might have hurt the bird and quickly opened the freezer door. The parrot calmly stepped out and said “I believe I may have offended you with my rude language and actions. I'll endeavor at once to correct my behavior. I really am truly sorry and beg your forgiveness.

David was astonished at the bird's change in attitude and was about to ask what had made such a dramatic change when the parrot continued, “May I ask what the chicken did?”

The readings for today focus on mercy and forgiveness. In the first, we're told we must forgive each other for “wrath and anger are hateful things”. The psalm reminds us that God is kind and merciful. The second reading tells us to live for Christ instead of ourselves. And in the gospel Jesus tells parables about mercy and tells Peter that we must forgive “seventy times seven” times.

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. In today's reading Peter asks Jesus how many times one ought to extend forgiveness to another. Peter proposes a reasonable number of times, perhaps seven. Jesus replies by extending

Peter's proposal by an enormous amount; not just seven times should one forgive, but 77 times. The parable of the unforgiving servant 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.

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. Despite the promise of the servant, it is unlikely that he would ever be able to repay the debt that he owes. The king is moved by the humility of the pleading servant and mercifully forgives the debt. Rather than displaying gratitude for this forgiveness, the servant confronts a fellow servant who owes him a small debt—a pittance when compared with the amount that was owed to the king. The unmerciful servant refuses the pleas of his fellow servant and sends the servant to prison.

A few other servants tell the merciful king about the actions of the unforgiving servant. The king punished the servant because he refused to show the kind of mercy he had himself received from the king. Jesus concludes by indicating that this is how it will be with God and those who refuse to forgive one another.

We have a temptation to quantify forgiveness as Peter tried to do, but Jesus' point is that forgiveness is not about quantity—the number of times we extend forgiveness to another. In the parable the king's forgiveness is like God's forgiveness, and it transforms us, helping us to be as forgiving as God. The lesson is clear: If we hoard God's mercy while showing no mercy to others, we risk forfeiting the effects of God's mercy in our lives.

When we go beneath the surface of the story, we see that even after being relieved of his debt, the first slave chose to live in a world of oppression and domination over his own debtor, even though the king's forgiveness had created an alternative to strict economic justice relationships, the slave rejected that option.

Given the opportunity to increase the kindness and forgiveness in his world, he instead supported a system that offered him petty superiority. By reinforcing a system of power of domination, he ultimately became his own torturer.

As Sirach warned, he held tight to terrible things: there would always be someone over him and that would always torment him. He indeed paid a heavy price for own his lack of forgiveness!

1st Reading (Sirach 27:30—28:7)

Wrath and anger are hateful things,
yet the sinner hugs them tight.

The vengeful will suffer the LORD's vengeance,
for he remembers their sins in detail.

Forgive your neighbor's injustice;
then when you pray, your own sins will be forgiven.

Could anyone nourish anger against another
and expect healing from the LORD?

Could anyone refuse mercy to another like himself,
can he seek pardon for his own sins?

If one who is but flesh cherishes wrath,
who will forgive his sins?

Remember your last days, set enmity aside;
remember death and decay, and cease from sin!

Think of the commandments, hate not your neighbor;
remember the Most High's covenant, and overlook faults.

2nd Reading (Romans 14:7-9)

Brothers and sisters:

None of us lives for oneself, and no one dies for oneself.

For if we live, we live for the Lord,
and if we die, we die for the Lord;

so then, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's.

For this is why Christ died and came to life,
that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

Gospel (Matthew 18:21-35)

Peter approached Jesus and asked him,
"Lord, if my brother sins against me,
how often must I forgive?

As many as seven times?"

Jesus answered, "I say to you, not seven times but seventy-seven
times.

That is why the kingdom of heaven may be likened to a king
who decided to settle accounts with his servants.

When he began the accounting,
a debtor was brought before him who owed him a huge amount.
Since he had no way of paying it back,
his master ordered him to be sold,
along with his wife, his children, and all his property,
in payment of the debt.

At that, the servant fell down, did him homage, and said,
'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back in full.'

Moved with compassion the master of that servant
let him go and forgave him the loan.

When that servant had left, he found one of his fellow servants
who owed him a much smaller amount.

He seized him and started to choke him, demanding,
'Pay back what you owe.'

Falling to his knees, his fellow servant begged him,
'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.'

But he refused.

Instead, he had the fellow servant put in prison
until he paid back the debt.

Now when his fellow servants saw what had happened,
they were deeply disturbed, and went to their master
and reported the whole affair.

His master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant!
I forgave you your entire debt because you begged me to.
Should you not have had pity on your fellow servant,
as I had pity on you?'
Then in anger his master handed him over to the torturers
until he should pay back the whole debt.
So will my heavenly Father do to you,
unless each of you forgives your brother from your heart."