

## Homily for Sunday, Sept. 13<sup>th</sup>, 2020 – 24<sup>th</sup> Sunday in OT

In the first reading, the Book of Sirach poses a question to us, and I do not think it is just a rhetorical question. ***Does anyone harbour anger against another, and expect healing from the, Lord?*** The answer unfortunately, is: of course! I know lots of people, including myself, who want God's healing mercy for themselves but who also want punishment for others. Our logic goes something like this: that person over there,



by their sin, has crossed a line that I have not crossed. And because they crossed this line, they have disqualified themselves from receiving mercy and only deserve punishment. I have not crossed the line and, so, deserve God's mercy. In that kind of logic, I become a self-appointed judge and jury determining where the line is and who has violated it. I determine who deserves mercy and who deserves punishment, not God.

The emphasis in the first reading and in the gospel is that mercy is always initiated by God. If God starts it, should we not continue it? In other words, if we have been the recipients, the beneficiaries, of God's mercy over and over, why would we want to withhold it from someone else?

In the world of forgiveness, all logic breaks down. When God forgives us, God has to throw all logic out the window; God, in a sense, has to break God's rules. In the world of logic, you have to withhold forgiveness and mercy: until you determine clearly who was the offender and who was the victim, until every debt is paid, until every injustice is corrected, until every infraction—no matter how minor—is accounted for, and until everyone who has ever hurt you is contrite and makes amends. If those criteria are not met, sorry, no forgiveness.

I have known priests who have withheld absolution to people because they did not divulge, to the priest's satisfaction, the answers to the questions "With who?" and "How many times?" or they were not able to recite the Act of Contrition by heart. It is a good thing God, whom we are supposed to model our mercy and forgiveness on, is not like us. Like I said, when God extends mercy to us, God throws out all logic. God's mercy is not a reward for the deserving. God's mercy is always paid forward given to the deserving and undeserving, to the worthy and to those who never feel worthy, to the inflated and to the humbled, not as a reward because you have changed for the better but as an offer in the hopes that change might be possible. God's mercy is like the sun that shines on the good and bad alike. It does not discriminate whatsoever.

During this liturgy we will pray the Our Father together, the only prayer Jesus ever taught us. At the heart of that prayer, we will say the words, "***forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.***" The most important word in that sentence is the little word "***as.***" We do not pray, "forgive us our trespasses only and when we have forgiven those who trespass against us." We are not dealing with a tit-for-tat God who says, "You didn't show mercy to your brother/sister, therefore I'm cutting off all forms of mercy in your life." We think that way; God does not. The prayer of Jesus (Our Father) says that as we forgive others, in the very moment we are extending forgiveness to others, in that moment, we trust that our trespasses are being forgiven. In other words, as we are giving the forgiveness away, help us to feel that we, ourselves, are being immersed into deeper and deeper levels of forgiveness for ourselves. As we give the forgiveness away, even to people that our logic dictates do not deserve it, help us to feel that we actually have more forgiveness within us rather than less.

Go to your own lived experience. Recall a time in your life when you gave forgiveness away. Did you feel cheapened? Lessened? Or, did you feel enriched? You probably felt enriched. I think that is what Jesus is getting at in his inaugural speech when he pronounces the Beatitude. One of the Beatitudes says, "***Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy.***" Not 20 years from now when you die, but in the very act of giving mercy, you will receive mercy. Do not think of the giving of mercy as two separate dynamics. Do not think this way: God has a book recording every time you gave or withheld mercy. God opens the book at the end of your life and says, "George showed a little mercy on August 14, 1987, show him a little mercy now!" Nor does God

say, “Marylin had an opportunity to forgive her brother-in-law in 1994 but did not do so, so cut all forgiveness off from her!” Forgiveness, like love, compassion, empathy, etc. does not have two separate flows—a flow here on earth and another flow in the life after that God either turns on or off. No. There is only one flow, one dynamic, and God never turns the flow of forgiveness or mercy off. We turn it off, as punishment, for the people who have burned us, hurt us, ripped us off, betrayed us, and in turning that flow off, we turn the one and only flow off. That is why when we turn the flow of forgiveness off for another, we actually turn off the flow to ourselves, after all, there is only one flow.

Jesus says in another part of the gospels, ***“What you freely receive, freely give.”*** If we have all freely received God’s mercy, which we have, should we not freely give it to others?” The first slave in today’s gospel reading freely received the king’s mercy for a huge debt he owed the king. However, he did not freely give to others what he had freely received. When this same slave came upon another slave who owed him just a small amount, he showed no mercy toward him but ceased him by the throat. Remember, there is only one flow of mercy. There is only one tap. We are in control of that tap, not God. When we stop the flow of forgiveness to our brothers and sisters, the flow dries up in our own lives.

Beginning in the late 1960s until the Good Friday Agreement of 1989, Northern Ireland was in a bloody crisis that seemed never to end. It was political, civil strife that turned into a religious battle pitting Catholics against Protestants. 35, 000 people, mostly civilians, were killed in those decades. It was sectarian tit-for-tat violence. In the April issues of the Knights of Columbus magazine, Columbia, there was a story of man recalling how, in 1972, as a 10-year old boy growing up in Northern Ireland he was shot in the face by a British soldier and lost his sight. He since has become friends with that very soldier.

He says,

***“In my younger years, I began to think about my blindness, about why I’m so happy and contented, and I realized that one very significant reason was because I had no anger and no hatred. Anger is a self-destructive emotion; it destroys you from the inside out, and I didn’t have that.”***

***Many years after that I began to think about forgiveness. Forgiveness is first and foremost a gift you give to yourself. Forget about the soldier who blinded me; if he wants my forgiveness, he has it, but that's not what's important. What's important for my peace of mind is that I forgive him. So, forgiveness isn't about the perpetrator; it's about yourself.***

***The second thing that I realized about forgiveness is it doesn't change the past, but it does change the future."***

As we continue on with this second Sunday of the Season of Creation, let us ponder our relationship with God and God's creation in light of today's gospel. What we have freely received, we must freely give. What, about this wonderful creation, have we freely received? And what, about this wonderful creation, are we freely giving to the next generation? Will the next generation see it as a free gift or gift that comes with a tremendous cost?

Fr. Phil