

Homily – October 6th, 2024 – 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time



Without having the text right in front of you, as I do, it's hard for you to remember a word or a line that may have stuck with you in one of today's scripture readings.

However, the last line of that second reading, the Letter to the Hebrews, stands out for me. It went like this: ***“Everyone is one in God,***

therefore he (Jesus) is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters.”

That text was written almost 2, 000 years ago. Would it be the same today, with the senseless violence that seems to be all around us, that Jesus would still not be ashamed to call us his brothers and sisters?

What a beautiful truth: that God's becoming “one of us” is—far from something shameful—it is something God is actually proud of! I still think to myself, though: as proud as God is, is there anything that might make Jesus ashamed of calling us his brothers and sisters?

Officially, no. God is never ashamed of being one of us. Our humanity is permanently a part of God's identity. But I still ask myself: Is there anything that we do or fail to do that would make Jesus just a “little less proud” of being our Brother?

The only thing I can think of is our failure to forgive. When we fail to forgive—and every one of us has a rationale of why someone out there isn't deserving of forgiveness—we opt for separation, divorce, separateness. Despite the fact that Moses allowed divorce because of peoples' "**hardness of heart**," Jesus reminds us that it was always God's plan that we be one. The word "symbol" literally means "to bring together." The opposite of symbolic is diabolic which means "to tear apart." Jesus is the symbol *par excellence* of God's desire to bring humanity together. The diabolic one, the devil, tries to tear us apart. Failing to forgive keeps us separate. Forgiving brings us together. Hardness of heart makes us dig in our heels and not listen to the other side of the argument. Forgiveness softens the heart. Hardness of heart makes us push children away, while softening of heart has us gather them into our arms as Jesus did. So, if there could be anything that could make Jesus just a "little less proud" of being our brother, it might be that—our reluctance to forgive, our choosing separation over and against union.

With the proliferation of mass shootings, mostly in the United States, but also here in Canada, sadly we've almost become accustomed to them to the point where they don't shock us as they should. However, there was one mass shooting that happened October 2, 2006, that I have never forgotten. I remember it because of the response of the survivors. 18 years ago, you may recall how an Amish community in Nickle Mine, Pennsylvania had their lives overturned when a gunman entered a one-room schoolhouse and killed five girls before turning the gun on himself. Five other girls were injured, one of them so badly that she never could walk, talk, or feed herself again. She was

five at the time and died just last month at the age of 23. Apparently, for the past 18 years, she was never without a smile.

What amazed me was the Amish peoples' response to the tragedy. The Amish community was so forgiving of their daughters' murderer. They walked over the murderer's house—on the very afternoon their daughters were killed—and offered forgiveness to his wife and family. They even invited the murderer's wife to the funerals of their dead daughters. Matt Lauer, a broadcaster at the time on "The Today Show," was completely flabbergasted when he said, "I don't understand this. If someone had murdered my daughter, I know I couldn't forgive them."

Some people do come around to forgiving senseless acts of violence, but usually it takes about 20 years of therapy and prayer to get there. These people did it the same afternoon when the pain was the sharpest and knee-jerk reaction should have been most immediate. They didn't react with their own form of violence but responded with forgiveness.

A rabbi explained it by saying that the Amish people have a discipline, a daily practice, of forgiveness. They practice forgiveness every day of their lives.

When I think of the Amish, I finally understand the words of Jesus when he said, "Walk while you still have the light" (Jn. 12:35). Cultivate the discipline of forgiveness while it's easy, while you still have the light. A day will come, a tragedy perhaps-- when it will feel like darkness, pain, and injustice are all

around you--and forgiveness will be hard to come by then. It's hard to manufacture forgiveness on the spot; I can't do it. The Amish, dressed in their bonnets and aprons and riding down the street in their horse-drawn carriages, have a lot to teach me.

It's always easier to blame rather than forgive. Blaming pushes the problem of the pain squarely on the shoulders of the other. Forgiveness requires a lot of heart-wrenching and soul-searching work. But just because forgiveness is hard, doesn't mean we shouldn't try it.

Not all that long ago, after Mass was over on a particular Saturday night at Holy Family church, I spotted a forlorn looking woman at the back of the church. When I asked her name she didn't say Mrs. Wortman, instead she said, "I'm the mother of this country's worst killer." It was like she was indirectly asking forgiveness and wondered if she was worthy enough to even stand at the back let alone take a seat in the pews. Knowing something about her background and all that she had suffered for years prior to the shooting, I could have just hugged her. No blame, no shame was required or needed...just God's forgiveness, mercy, and healing. What a capacity there is in the soul of this woman and in the souls of the Amish of Pennsylvania, to hold pain and not to transmit it to anyone else.

When the disciples ask Jesus to teach them how to pray, he deliberately included asking God for forgiveness and forgiving others in the Our Father. When they asked him how much they should forgive, he told them, "not seven

times but 70 *times* 7 times.” And perhaps, most importantly, Jesus forgave his murderers on the Cross. He wasn’t going to die until people knew they were forgiven. He was able to do this not because he retained some super power as God’s privileged Son. No. He was able to forgive because he was our Brother and as our Brother he has never been ashamed of us.

The Amish, I think, often make Jesus proud of being one of us. Forgiveness for them, as it should be for us, is a daily discipline. Forgiveness starts with husbands and wives, with children and parents, with neighbours and co-workers, and finally with leaders of nations. We have to start forgiving as individuals before we can do it as a community. When we do it, Jesus can never be more proud.

~Fr. Phil