

Homily for the Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

September 17, 2023

St. Bavo Parish

Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.

First Reading: Sirach 27:30-28:7 (Forgive your neighbor's injustice, and your sins will be forgiven.)

Responsory: Psalm 103 (The Lord is kind and merciful, slow to anger, and rich in compassion.)

Second Reading: Romans 14:7-9 (Whether we live or die, we are the Lord's.)

Gospel: Matthew 18:21-35 (How many times must I forgive my brother?)

In today's gospel, Peter asks a very reasonable question: "If my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive?" Notice that he's not trying to avoid his moral obligation to forgive. He's not asking permission to cling to anger and vengeance, as Sirach describes at the beginning of today's first reading, where he says, "Wrath and anger are hateful things, yet the sinner hugs them tight." No, Peter *assumes* that he must forgive other people's offenses. Obviously, he has learned that lesson from Jesus. He just wants to know *how many times*? Surely, Jesus can't expect his disciples to just let people walk all over them. If our brother continues to sin against us over and over again, repeatedly asking for forgiveness but showing no sign of real conversion, there must be a point at which we can say with a clear conscience, "Enough is enough." Peter suggests that *seven times* might be a reasonable limit. That should give the sinner ample opportunity to repent and reform. In fact, seven times might strike many of us as rather generous.

Jesus' response to that suggestion must have come as quite a shock to Peter and all the other disciples: "I say to you, not *seven times*, but *seventy-seven times*." Really? *Seventy-seven times*? Jesus clearly means to say that *there is no limit*. We must keep forgiving *indefinitely*.

That is an extreme position — one which most people would reject as unjust and completely unrealistic. I suspect that some of Jesus' disciples probably thought the same thing at first. But then, Jesus' parable about the two servants and their forgiving Master reveals why his demand for limitless mercy is more reasonable than it first appears. In fact, when seen from the proper perspective, *withholding* forgiveness from a fellow sinner seems outrageous.

The *Master*, who obviously represents our merciful God, is the key to the whole parable. Remove him from the picture, and that middle scene, where one servant cannot pay back the debt that he owes to his fellow servant, looks totally different. Under Jewish law, the creditor's actions — demanding repayment of his loan and throwing the debtor into prison when he can't pay — would have been perfectly legal and morally justified. That's what happened to delinquent debtors in Jewish society. Either they paid what they owed, or they went to prison until their families could scrape together the money.

The Master's actions in the first scene completely change the moral calculus of that later confrontation between the two servants. The punitive measures that would have been justified by societal norms become a source of outrage among all the other servants *in light of what the Master has done*. The very same servant who demands repayment of his *small* loan has just received forgiveness of a *much larger debt*. When he fell to his knees and said to his Master,

“Be patient with me, and I will pay you back,” the Master was moved with compassion. Realizing that the servant could never pay him back in full, the Master canceled the entire debt. You would think that the servant who has received such great mercy would be in a rather forgiving mood when he comes across his fellow servant, who owes him a much smaller debt. Now that he finds himself in the role of the *creditor*, rather than the *debtor*, we expect him to imitate his Master’s kindness. Instead, when his fellow servant falls to *his* knees and begs for mercy in the *exact same words* that the first servant had spoken to their Master only moments earlier, he is *not* moved with compassion. Apparently, he sees *no connection* between the two episodes. All he sees is a debtor who owes him money and can’t pay it back.

That sort of tunnel vision is what gets *us* into trouble when a brother or sister sins against us. Our tendency is to look at the other person’s sin in isolation: “That person owes me a debt, *period*.” That may be true, but what about our *own* debts? We can cling to our righteous indignation as long as we ignore our own history of sin. But any justification for our anger and lack of compassion falls apart very quickly as soon as we recall the great multitude of sins that *God has forgiven us*. Like the first servant in the parable, we have come before our Master with heavy burdens of sin. Recognizing that we can never repay God for our failures, we have simply thrown ourselves at the Lord’s feet and asked for mercy. And the Lord has been moved with compassion *every time*. Every single time that we have entered the confessional with true repentance in our heart, we have returned home with our sins forgiven and our burdens lifted. Moreover, we are *absolutely certain* that there will never come a time when the Lord will say to us, “Enough is enough.” No confessor is ever going to say, “I’m sorry, but you’ve confessed that same sin too many times. You’ve passed your limit. God will not forgive you anymore.” If that were to happen, we would be utterly lost, crushed by the weight of our sins.

God’s limitless mercy, which we have received in the past and count on receiving in the future, must be in the back of our minds whenever we deal with our fellow servants who have sinned against us. Otherwise, we might find ourselves meeting the same end as the merciless servant in the parable. In the ominous words of Sirach, “Remember your last days; set enmity aside.” None of us wants to stand before the Lord on Judgment Day and hear him say the same thing to us that the Master said to his servant in the parable: “You wicked servant! ... Should you not have had pity on your fellow servant, as I had pity on you?” If we want to avoid that terrible fate, we should heed Sirach’s advice: “Think of the commandments, hate *not* your neighbor; remember the Most High’s covenant, and *overlook faults*.”

Repeatedly overlooking other people’s sins can be difficult. The key is not to “forgive and forget,” as the old saying goes, but to *“remember and forgive.”* We remember the debt of sin that others owe us, but we weigh that against the *much larger debt* of sin that God has forgiven us in the past. That’s what makes all the difference. Filled with gratitude for the Lord’s boundless mercy toward us, we allow ourselves to be moved with compassion for our fellow sinners. Then we muster the strength to offer them just a *tiny fraction* of the forgiveness that we have received. Now, doesn’t that seem like a very reasonable thing to do?