

24th Sunday
9/17/2023

THE GIFT TO OTHERS AND OURSELVES

Jesus speaks powerful and even scary words in today's gospel. The parable itself is powerful and then Jesus' closing words move it beyond powerful to ominous. *So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives your brother from your heart.*

For a Christian, forgiveness is a two step process. Step One comes with repentance, with confession and *being forgiven*. It includes trying to realize just how much that means, to be forgiven by God, to be really forgiven, forgiven by God; that out of love for you Jesus came to suffer, be crucified and rise from the dead. Realizing all of that isn't meant to make us guilty but ultimately grateful, grateful and generous. And that's where Step Two comes in.

As we have been forgiven, so too, *we are to forgive others*, mirroring God's generous love. In this passage and elsewhere, we are reminded that forgiveness isn't something optional but required. If you need to be reminded, think about those words a Christian ought to pray every day: *Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.*

Forgiveness can be difficult business. We all know what it's like to be hurt and at one time or another, we've all hurt other people. Those hurts we receive can run deeply and may even involve abuse or many types of cruel trauma. At times, it can be harder to forgive people who have hurt those we love more than to forgive the people who hurt us.

The key to all this centers around what we mean by forgiveness. What does it mean and not mean? Forgiveness doesn't mean forgetting what happened. That's foolish. Forgiveness doesn't mean you have to become friends with the one you've forgiven. Forgiveness doesn't mean you have to ignore justice. People can be forgiven and still be required to face the consequences of their actions. On the most basic level, forgiveness means that minimally, you don't want harm to come to that person. You don't want that person to be walking down the street and for a piano to fall on that person. If you can get to that point, you have reached the base level of forgiveness. Like love, forgiveness isn't just a feeling but a decision.

Forgiveness is not the same as healing. You can forgive and still be hurt, still upset with someone, even resentful. The point is that forgiveness can be the first step toward healing and not the last step. Forgiveness means that you are not going to let that hurt and anger, no matter how legitimate it may truly be, to drive the car of your life. And if you do, it will take you to a bad place. Forgiveness can take time but we don't strive to do it just with sheer human determination but rather with the grace of God. Forgiveness can be a sign of the Kingdom.

The unforgiving, angry servant can be our teacher in the negative. He is morally deaf upon hearing the words he just so recently spoke himself. He has a spiritual amnesia forgetting the forgiveness he has just received and he's downright petty. He will not share the gift he has just received. He warns us in our own lives against moral deafness, spiritual amnesia and just being downright petty. As God forgives us, we're obliged to forgive others. The forgiveness of our sins that we receive in the Sacrament of Reconciliation is God's gift. We *cannot* earn it. But we can lose it. We can lose the gift of forgiveness by failing to share it.

We can think of forgiveness as a gift we give to another person and it is. Forgiveness is a gift we can also receive from another person. But there is still another important way that forgiveness is a gift.

Forgiveness is a gift that we give not just to someone else but to ourselves. Father Jacques Philippe is a very gifted contemporary spiritual writer. In a book entitled, Spiritual Freedom, Father Jacques wisely observes that unless we learn how important forgiveness is, we won't experience interior freedom but instead we will be prisoners, prisoners to our own bitterness. He notes that refusing to forgive binds us to the person we resent and that we can become disproportionately and I would add, perhaps even dysfunctionally, dependent upon those we hate. Or as we hear in the first reading, *Could anyone nourish anger against another and expect healing from the Lord? ...Hate not your neighbor, remember the Most High's covenant.*

Forgiveness is work. Forgiveness can be a process requiring us to be patient with others and even with ourselves but it's something that all Christians are called to do. We have been forgiven. We have received a gift and the gift we have

received, we're called to share with others. Jesus's call to forgive isn't to make us bitter but better. Yes, it's a gift to others but it's a gift for our good as well. Our psalm today speaks of God being kind and merciful.

Nourished by the Eucharist and with lives of intentional faith, may we grow in our awareness of how great God's love and mercy is for us and may we share that with lives that are kind and merciful. Unforgiveness, bitterness, resentment weigh us down and as Father Jacques notes, that will only increase evil in the world. Forgiveness, properly understood for what it is and what it is not, leads to interior freedom. It becomes a gift we give not only to others but even to ourselves. A gift that reflects and reveals the wisdom, life and love of our God.