

## Reconciliation

Jesus begins and ends his ministry teaching about forgiveness. Forgiveness is one of Our Lord's most important and, yet, most difficult lessons. Jesus shows that without forgiveness love, compassion, thanksgiving, all of life is distorted.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy..." so Jesus teaches at the start of the Sermon on the Mount. Those who give mercy will receive mercy. Later in the Sermon, Jesus teaches the Lord's Prayer, including the petition for forgiveness, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us..." He then says, "...if you forgive others their trespasses your heavenly Father also will forgive you, but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive you." (Matthew 6:14-15)

Today's Gospel reading reinforces this basic concept of forgiveness. The parable of the unmerciful servant exaggerates Jesus' teaching. We see the extremes between divine forgiveness and human forgiveness. And, of course, at the end of his life, as he was being nailed to the cross, Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:34) One commentator writes, "The cross was raised to silence the blasphemy that forgiveness is easy."<sup>1</sup>

We know how hard it is to forgive – to forgive others, to forgive ourselves, to know God's grace and mercy and forgiveness when we are overwhelmed by anger, grief, loss, pain, confusion. Sometimes it seems we need to forgive God!

In today's parable the servant is forgiven the equivalent of a multi-million dollar debt. There is no way he could ever pay back "ten-thousand talents." Yet this same servant cannot forgive a fellow servant who owes him about \$20! This absurd contrast is Jesus' answer to Peter when Peter tries to specify how many times he needs to forgive. Jesus replies, "Not seven times...seventy-seven times." This represents an infinite, endless amount of forgiveness.

In my lifetime the most powerful witness to forgiveness is Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Fifteen years ago, he wrote a book, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, based upon his role as the head of the South African Commission for Truth and Reconciliation.

Tutu tried to help his country to heal and to move on after decades of racist injustices and horrible atrocities under the apartheid system. I discovered that Tutu wrote another book last spring with one of his daughters. In *The Book of Forgiving* Tutu writes that the process of forgiveness involves four actions:

1. telling the story
2. naming the hurt
3. granting forgiveness
4. renewing or releasing the relationship

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<sup>1</sup> George Buttrick, *The Parables of Jesus*, Harper, New York, 1928, page 101

Tutu bases his own understanding of forgiveness upon the experiences of his childhood when for years he witnessed his father verbally and physically abusing his mother. Years later he wanted to tell his father how he had experienced forgiveness, but his father died before he could talk with him.

Forgiveness is release from resentment, from anger, from the need for revenge. Forgiveness frees us to accept God's grace. Holding onto the past prevents us from living fully into the future.

Of course, forgiveness does not mean accepting injustice or condoning abuse. Nor is our understanding of forgiveness dependent upon another's repentance or even acknowledgement of wrongdoing. Forgiveness is for us and for our relationship with God. Tutu writes that forgiveness is the "best form of self interest." When we forgive, we heal.

Each week, usually several times each week, I'm aware of how necessary and of how difficult true forgiveness really is. Some individuals, some families, some communities live with great pain, many resentments, anger. This often leads to dysfunction and to spiritual, emotional and physical disease.

My parents divorced when I was in high school. A few years later they both remarried and enjoyed very happy, long marriages the second time around. I never really knew why they divorced, except that my mother didn't want to move and start all over again in another new place as my father moved up the corporate ladder and pursued his own professional advancement. We stayed in South Georgia. My dad moved first to Atlanta, and then, back to New York City.

But soon after my mom remarried, I realized she was still very angry at my father. In fact she carried deep resentment toward him all her life. I wanted to talk with her about forgiveness but we never really were able to have that discussion. Most of you know she died in March and I was very concerned that she didn't have peace; she didn't find release from decades of anger.

The Church is supposed to be a community where forgiveness is a reality. Matthew's Gospel is written for the building up of community, the strengthening of discipleship, the teaching of the faith. How sad it is to see churches divided, conflicted, resentful, unable to live forgiveness.

Perhaps we should make it a point, every time we pray, especially during the Lord's Prayer, to concretely visualize someone who needs our forgiveness or someone we may have hurt even in a small way. We can lift this person up to God in our prayer and ask for forgiveness. Then forgiveness becomes more than words; it becomes a way of life we can live more nearly as we pray and we will be able to practice what we preach.

Exodus 14:19-31  
Psalm 114  
Romans 14:1-12  
Matthew 18:21-35