

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time - A
9/11/11

Two friends were walking through the desert. During the journey they had an argument, and one friend slapped the other one in the face. The one who got slapped was hurt, but without saying anything, wrote in the sand, "Today my best friend slapped me in the face."

They kept on walking until they found an oasis, where they decided to take a bath. The one who had been slapped got stuck in the mud and started drowning, but the friend saved him. After he recovered from nearly drowning, he wrote on a stone, "Today my best friend saved my life."

His friend asked him, "After I hurt you, you wrote in the sand and now, you write on a stone, why?" The other friend replied "When someone hurts us we should write it down in sand where winds of forgiveness can erase it away. But, when someone does something good for us, we must engrave it in stone where no wind can ever erase it."

What a week to be focusing on forgiveness. The focus this week has been on the 10th anniversary of the terror attacks on 9/11. At that time, I was living in New York and actually saw the World Trade Center burning - and then not be there anymore. And in the weeks that followed, our parish - which had a large share of fire and policeman - repeated the sad process of their funerals.

If there was a recurring theme at the time, it was of revenge. A sense that "we need to strike back" that has continued till today. And then we hear Peter asking today, "How many times Lord? How many times do I need to forgive? Seven times? Jesus gives his answer in the parable we just heard.

In the parable of the master and servants, Jesus gives us an idea of how we're supposed to live. His answer to Peter's question about how many times he is expected to forgive makes it clear that there's no limit to doing this. Jesus reveals a God for whom there is no limit to the number of times that we're forgiven. A God who's overjoyed when we turn back to him for forgiveness. A God whose mercy to us should encourage us to show that same mercy to our fellow human beings. A God that gives us an example of love and forgiveness that should form the basis of our own relationship with others.

The unmerciful servant shows a lack of gratitude for the mercy shown to him. He's just been forgiven by the master, the debt owed him is insignificant compared to the amount forgiven him; his hard attitude against his fellow servant is the opposite of the generosity and kindness shown to him.

If we're honest, the servant who refuses to forgive is how we act most of the time. In reality, we find it *very* hard to forgive. People struggle to forgive once, let alone a second or third time. Something within us seems to feel that I have a right to continue in my anger towards someone who had hurt me. After all, I didn't create the situation. The other person did. I didn't attack the other person. The other person attacked me. I was the victim, not the aggressor. My life would have been better if that other person had not said or done this offense. And so we attempt to justify our anger, our grudge.

All of us have our own personal stories or battles with others. Everyone has been wronged by someone, hurt by someone. But no one has the right to harbor a grudge; at least we can't if we consider the amount of mercy God has showered upon us. When we don't forgive, we live in a way that is the opposite of the way of that God created us. When we fail to forgive, it means that we can't expect God to forgive us. Forgiving others is our way of realizing the chance for starting over that God offers to us and to imitate Him is to share in His divine life. After all, we're just as guilty of causing others pain,

and would hope to be forgiven by them.

Jesus urges us to forgive over and over again and to show mercy to one another. This is how God treats us and he asks us to imitate him. The forgiveness and mercy that we will receive from God is linked to the forgiveness and mercy that we give to others. It may go against the grain for us to forgive. It seems easy to say to hate the sin but not the sinner. But, in reality, we have difficulty separating the act from the one who committed the sin, pain, and hurt to us. There are very strong emotions that block us from forgiving and reaching out to others especially those who may have hurt us very deeply. Pride or lack of humility prevents us from being merciful and understanding to those who have wronged us.

Forgiveness isn't an excuse for the wrongful actions of others. Forgiveness doesn't mean a lack of concern when it comes to protecting the innocent. Forgiveness means setting aside the anger and resentment that only harms the person who cannot let it go. Forgiveness means looking upon others with pity rather than hatred. To see in them our own tendency to fail, but also the need to be forgiven.

Today, we may pray for forgiveness among nations, but there are daily acts of forgiveness – in the life of a couple, in our family, at work, among friends, that are very personal reminders of the healing that can take place. Forgiveness is about making a choice on how we look at each other. It's making a choice, like the man in the opening story, to see the hurt caused by others as temporary as the hurts we cause. Instead, the enduring memories will be of the good things we do for each other.

“Lord, if my brother keeps on sinning against me, how many times do I have to forgive him? Seven times?” How difficult this story must be for so many people. Not just the victims of 9/11, but also for the victims of prejudice, domestic violence, child abuse and corporate injustice.

“Lord, if my brother keeps on sinning against me, how many times do I have to forgive him? Seven times?” The shadow of 9/11 still falls across the world. But so does the shadow of the cross. It has the power to heal. It has the power to restore. It has the power to forgive. That is the message that endures, and can't be erased.