

24th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME (Cycle A)

September 7, 2011 – Deacon Bill Nourse, Ed.D.

INTRODUCTION

Today's theme, obviously, is forgiveness. I read a commentary that suggested that God's forgiveness of our sins **on the condition** of our forgiving the sins of others against us. That one kind of startled me – the idea that God loves us unconditionally, but forgives our sins conditionally. I don't know. I'm still not sure about that one. But I can see how it could be that way.

It's easy to express sorrow and regret and contrition for our own transgressions. But it's a lot harder to forgive others. It's a lot easier to hold onto anger and resentment than it is to embrace forgiveness of those who have injured us.

But it's even harder to forgive ourselves. It's harder yet to let go of the guilt of our past transgressions. Maybe that's what it's about – that we not only have to forgive others, but we have to forgive ourselves as well.

Maybe that's why the servant in today's Gospel acted the way he did. Even after the king had forgiven him a huge debt, he still could not forgive himself. He was still angry with himself that he could not pay his debt.

So, what do we do when we're angry at ourselves? That's right – we project our anger onto someone else. That's what the "ungrateful servant" did. He turned all his self-loathing and angry recrimination on the person who owed him money.

We do that, too – don't we? We take out our own anger and self-doubt on whoever's handy. Usually, who's "handy" is a spouse, or a child, or another family member. Or sometimes it might be a subordinate at work.

Or sometimes it might be someone we don't even know. Maybe the driver in the car next to us? Maybe the guy trying to cut in front of us

at that gas pump at the Kroger on Kirby? Maybe even an inanimate object? “Stupid hammer, you smashed my thumb!”

We feel anger toward ourselves, and project it onto someone who had absolutely nothing to do with the reason we’re angry.

Human relationships are complex. We all want to feel good about ourselves. We’ll do almost anything to convince ourselves that we’re O.K.

Lately, I’ve had the feeling sometimes that I’m getting better at it. But then I find myself saying, “Oh, Bill, you’re so STUPID!” Upon further reflection, I realize that’s not any better at all. It’s like still feeling unforgiven when we really are forgiven.

“Back in the day,” as people say, I used to have a party on January 14 every year. It was a “Let Bygones be Bygones” party. Forgive and forget. Or at least forgive.

January 14 is Benedict Arnold’s birthday. The man’s been dead for over 200 years. We won. He lost. After all these years, it’s time to get over it. He can’t hurt anyone any more. Let it go.

I asked people to write their grudges and past hurts and unforgiven sins – theirs, and anybody else’s that were a source of pain to them – to write them on a piece of paper and burn them in the fireplace. Get rid of ‘em.

January 14 is early enough in the year to be able to start the year with a clean slate, as it were. We erase our failures, we ask God to erase our failures.

But we don’t have to wait until January 14. We can do it today. Right now.

Can we believe that we are forgiven? That we are accepted, loved, forgiven? That we can accept love and forgiveness?

But to do that, we also have to forgive others. After all, in just a few minutes, we’re going to ask God to forgive us our trespasses **as we**

forgive those who trespass against us. Is that really what we want?

It takes courage to do that. Last Sunday's Gospel was about what we call fraternal correction. Jesus encouraged us to have the courage to face up to those who have trespassed against us. Not in a confrontational sense, but in the sense of "fraternal correction."

Sadly, not a lot of people are able to respond to that in a loving, forgiving, self-examining kind of way. It's hard to look yourself in the face sometimes. But maybe we could do it that way when someone else corrects us. "You know, you're right." The fact that we have been forgiven so great a debt should be more than enough reason to forgive relatively minor faults against us.

A spirit of vengeance and anger towards another person is an obstacle to receiving forgiveness for our own sins. We cannot expect to present ourselves before the Lord and hope to receive mercy if we have not already shown mercy to others.

The Gospel reminds us of the basic reason for forgiving from the heart: We, too, are in need of mercy. This basic truth was forgotten many times in both the Old and New Testament. King David flew into a rage at the prophet Nathan's story of an unjust rich man who stole a poor man's only sheep. But then Nathan reminded the king that he himself had done even worse. "***You*** are the man."

Recognizing our own injustices can help us see the injustices of others with compassion. The commandment of Christian forgiveness is not just the arbitrary will of God. It's the recognition, in truth, of our own basic unworthiness.

We have no right to demand from others what we do not fulfill ourselves. This basic truth is so important that it becomes a condition for receiving God's forgiveness.

We live in a fragmented society. Just a ride on a bus is enough to see the distance and isolation people feel towards each other. Even our own family and our own community can seem hardly less fragmented and isolated sometimes. It can be a struggle to establish and

maintain intimate openness. It's much easier to slam the door on others.

The Church should offer an authentic experience of community and sense of belonging to all. That means **us**. When we talk of “the Church,” we must realize that we're talking about **ourselves**. When we begin a sentence with “the Church ought to . . . ,” we might ask ourselves if we are doing what we think “the Church” ought to do.

The Gospel reminds us of the reason we are to forgive from the heart all offenses against us – and that we are in need of even greater forgiveness.

We hear it so much, we can come to tune it out -- the Gospel commandments of love and forgiveness of one's neighbor. Our treatment of others (that is, every person), and our treatment of God, and our own treatment at the hands of God are closely linked.

In Matthew 25, Jesus tells us that, “in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me.” Here we see the full force of identity between the treatment of one of the poorest or most unfortunate of people, and the treatment of God. Jesus does not say “as though it were done to me”; He implies a much more direct association.

I would be remiss if I did not note that tomorrow is the anniversary of the tragedy of September 11, 2001. I know it's difficult for many of us to think of those events in the context of forgiveness. It's difficult for me, too.

But a spirit of vengeance and anger towards another person is an obstacle to receiving forgiveness for our own sins. Wrath and anger are hateful things . . . the vengeful will suffer the LORD's vengeance . . . Could anyone nourish anger against another and expect healing from the LORD?

READINGS

Reading 1 Sir 27:30-28:7

Wrath and anger are hateful things,
yet the sinner hugs them tight.
The vengeful will suffer the LORD's vengeance,
for he remembers their sins in detail.
Forgive your neighbor's injustice;
then when you pray, your own sins will be forgiven.
Could anyone nourish anger against another
and expect healing from the LORD?
Could anyone refuse mercy to another like himself,
can he seek pardon for his own sins?
If one who is but flesh cherishes wrath,
who will forgive his sins?
Remember your last days, set enmity aside;
remember death and decay, and cease from sin!
Think of the commandments, hate not your neighbor;
remember the Most High's covenant, and overlook faults.

Responsorial Psalm Ps 103:1-2, 3-4, 9-10, 11-12

R. (8) **The Lord is kind and merciful, slow to anger, and rich in compassion.**
Bless the LORD, O my soul;
and all my being, bless his holy name.
Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and forget not all his benefits.
R. **The Lord is kind and merciful, slow to anger, and rich in compassion.**
He pardons all your iniquities,
heals all your ills.
redeems your life from destruction,
he crowns you with kindness and compassion.
R. **The Lord is kind and merciful, slow to anger, and rich in compassion.**
He will not always chide,
nor does he keep his wrath forever.
Not according to our sins does he deal with us,
nor does he requite us according to our crimes.
R. **The Lord is kind and merciful, slow to anger, and rich in compassion.**
For as the heavens are high above the earth,
so surpassing is his kindness toward those who fear him.
As far as the east is from the west,
so far has he put our transgressions from us.
R. **The Lord is kind and merciful, slow to anger, and rich in compassion.**

Reading 2 Rom 14:7-9

Brothers and sisters:
None of us lives for oneself, and no one dies for oneself.
For if we live, we live for the Lord,
and if we die, we die for the Lord;
so then, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's.
For this is why Christ died and came to life,
that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

Gospel Mt 18:21-35

Peter approached Jesus and asked him,
"Lord, if my brother sins against me,
how often must I forgive?
As many as seven times?"
Jesus answered, "I say to you, not seven times but seventy-seven times.
That is why the kingdom of heaven may be likened to a king
who decided to settle accounts with his servants.
When he began the accounting,

a debtor was brought before him who owed him a huge amount.
Since he had no way of paying it back,
his master ordered him to be sold,
along with his wife, his children, and all his property,
in payment of the debt.
At that, the servant fell down, did him homage, and said,
'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back in full.'
Moved with compassion the master of that servant
let him go and forgave him the loan.
When that servant had left, he found one of his fellow servants
who owed him a much smaller amount.
He seized him and started to choke him, demanding,
'Pay back what you owe.'
Falling to his knees, his fellow servant begged him,
'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.'
But he refused.
Instead, he had the fellow servant put in prison
until he paid back the debt.
Now when his fellow servants saw what had happened,
they were deeply disturbed, and went to their master
and reported the whole affair.
His master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant!
I forgave you your entire debt because you begged me to.
Should you not have had pity on your fellow servant,
as I had pity on you?'
Then in anger his master handed him over to the torturers
until he should pay back the whole debt.
So will my heavenly Father do to you,
unless each of you forgives your brother from your heart."