

Current Homilies:

9.16.17 Homily: Twenty-Fourth Ordinary

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Sir 27:30—28:7; Ps 103:1-4,9-12; Rom 14:7-9; Matt 18:21-35

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It is pretty clear that forgiveness is an important aspect of life. We all have surely learned that by this stage of our lives. But still, it seems sometimes we just can't hear it enough. So during this season of Pentecost, this "ordinary time" of our lives, our lectionary readings remind us. And remind us. And remind us.

Today we hear from Matthew what seems to be a recurring story in our world. Call it the case of the unrepentant penitent. This is the guy who knows how to milk the system, so to speak. He's been caught up short, so he wheedles his way out of the jam he's gotten himself into. And instead of learning from his experience, instead of being grateful and playing it forward, he bludgeons the next guy in line. Bottom line goes back to last week's gospel: Those debts you don't forgive will weigh you down and hold you prisoner. Your debtor may go free, but you are *bound* by your hardness of heart. How can you go through life so amorally? How can your heart be pummeled into softening?

Could anyone say it more graphically than Sirach? This is an absolutely frightening text, and especially those who actually believe that God is out to get them ought to clean up their act in a hurry upon hearing it. Instead, it seems as if more and more so-called "good" Christians use texts like these to lord it over others, as if it is "they themselves" who are the so-called God of vengeance and retribution. And we all need to be ever vigilant on this subject of vengeance and retribution, because too often we confuse righteousness and justice with these.

What have we learned, both from our successes and from our failings?

Paul says we are powerless over our future if we refuse to be accountable for our present. This too is related to last week's Pauline lesson: "Owe no one anything except to love one another." Seems, whatever the question, love is the answer. With love there is forgiveness, and life everlasting.

Only, love begins with our love of self. This is not egotistical love, not narcissism or vanity or an exaggerated sense of self-importance. And it is, unfortunately, not taught. It *has to be* self-learned, intuited throughout life, as we listen to that Spirit of Wisdom within ourselves. We have to work and to pray, in order to balance what we *are* taught: to concurrently *grovel* as unworthy creatures of Satan while *reveling* in our superiority over those less fortunate than we. We are taught, in other words, to be *falsely* modest and *secretly* smug; but "experience is the *best* teacher" is *surely* a truth for every living thing. Because our experiences are lived out in tangent with Sophia, who speaks love and forgiveness within us as means of teaching us our truth.

I recently read a heart-rending essay in NCR that is precisely about this over-arching problem of self-forgiveness. It is a common story. Seems the writer had put her mother into a nursing home to die even though mom never wanted to go to a nursing home. And the writer has never forgiven herself for this. Even though it was the right thing to do. Even though it was the most loving choice she could have made at the time she made it. Even though her mother forgave her. Even though she knows God forgives her. Even though she forgives everyone else who has felt forced into making similar decisions against the long-expressed wants of their family member.

How do we get past that impasse? I think a part of the answer lies in the author's ability to feel the pain of others who are in similar circumstances; to learn from their experience, be grateful, and play it forward; to reach out with genuine forgiveness and empathy; and to hold the other in absolute love. I think that it is the author's own woundedness which allows her the freedom to love completely, and in that perfect loving she is forgiving. But she is not forgetting, because it is only in our remembrance of what we *would* do differently from our past that we *can* do differently in our present. This is learning from experience. It *is* forgiving one's self. As Paul said: Whatever the question, love is the answer. With love there is forgiveness, and life everlasting.

Compassionate God, remove from us all hardness of heart, that we may accept all people as your precious children, forgive all enemies as our own sisters and brothers, and never forget that whenever we reject anyone, we reject you. We pray in the holy name of our risen brother, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

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