

Twenty-Fourth Third Sunday in Ordinary Time A2023

Last Sunday, our Lord spoke to us about the importance of fraternal correction and reconciliation. Today, he comes back with the question of the necessity of forgiveness. His insistence on such connected themes draws our attention to the truth that correction without forgiveness leads nowhere.

Peter, who, with the other disciples followed Our Lord's speech, thought he would be generous if he could forgive someone who wrongs him seven times. However, with astonishment he learned that he had to forgive seventy-seven times.

If we remain in the field of simple Math, we realize that seventy-seven times equal four hundred ninety times. With all that in mind, it is impossible, for sure, to keep an open notebook in which we regularly write down the names of the persons and the bad things they do to us so that we come to the number four hundred ninety. Thus, it is clear that the point of our Lord is not that there is a number beyond which forgiveness becomes intolerable. His point, rather, is that that our forgiveness should be limitless.

That is what he tries to prove with the parable of the master with his two servants. The master forgave the enormous debt of the first servant, which he could never hope to pay back. When he goes out, he refuses to forgive a fellow-servant who owed him a too small amount in comparison.

For whom is this story told? The story is meant for us. Our Lord does not want us to stop and calculate the amount of the damage done to us. His Father is a God of infinite mercy who has forgiven all of us. He wants that we share that forgiveness and mercy with others. God's inexhaustible goodness is here contrasted to the meanness of human heart that is incapable of forgiving even the smallest offenses

But, how many spiritual and material gifts we have received from God in this life, for ourselves, our families and our children? The pain inflicted upon us by others is nothing in comparison to the gifts received. This is what the unmerciful servant forgot. He ruined a golden opportunity to do good and become a person of kindness, reflecting a small portion of the forgiveness he has received. Instead, he held onto his past, his anger at the money still unpaid, and his refusal to forgive destroyed him.

All that raises the question: Why shall we forgive? The book of Sirach tells us that when we give free vent to our vengeful instincts, to our rage and grudges, we do not get any justice; on the contrary we make things worse. It is necessary to go beyond simple justice and open our heart to mercy. The forgiveness of an offense done to us is an indispensable condition to pray and obtain pardon from God: If one who is but flesh cherishes wrath, who will forgive his sins?

Sirach tells us also that forgiveness is a matter of life or death, of peace or bitterness. The unforgiving person is self-consumed by wrath, anger and hateful feelings. The failure to forgive brings much pain and uncontrollable reactions. Forgiveness towards others enables us to be in control of ourselves and allows us to be delivered from wrath, anger and mistrust.

There is more: we have to forgive one another because we are all sinners. What makes a difference between us is probably the degree of sinning or the type of sin in which we are involved, but not the reality of sin itself. Therefore, we have to be open to the possibility of forgiving each other as an explicit recognition that we are all sinners.

God himself continually forgives us our sins. We have to remember if it were not for God's mercy, and if he would keep the record of our sins, none of us would survive (Ps 130). We have to be appreciative of God's mercy and imitate him.

Because of God's mercy toward us, it would be unwise to start calculating the wrong done to us by others. That is exactly the second debtor has done; he forgot that he was forgiven and he has in turn to forgive. Instead, he became mean with his fellow servants. How, then, can God be merciful with us if we do not show mercy to others? How can God be compassionate with us if we lack compassion toward others?

As disciples, we have to imitate our Lord himself who forgave his murderers on the cross. He is our model in everything. We cannot pretend to belong to him without imitating his example when it is about forgiveness.

Is our Lord's forgiveness an unrealizable utopia? Not all. Some people in our time have tried to put this message into practice and they have succeeded. Think about Nelson Mandela. How he led the process of reconciliation in South Africa after the apartheid. Beyond hurt and rancor, he led the black community to healing through forgiveness and reconciliation.

As difficult as forgiveness might be, if we put in our heart and our will, it can work. Here, we have to take seriously the word of our Lord when he invites us to come and learn from him (Matthew 11: 28-29). Forgiveness is above all a school of life. How wonderful life would be if more people could say: "I am sorry", "I apologize for what did."

When we talk about forgiveness, it does not mean the faults or hurts done to us do not matter. Rather, it means that, in spite of the harms and the pain we have feel about what happened, we willingly choose to put everything behind us in order to give chance to peace and the possibility of living together.

Someone might object: does not to forgive seventy times seven mean to encourage injustice and to give a green light to abuse? No. Christian forgiveness does not exclude that, in certain cases, we might also have to denounce a person and take them to court, especially when what is at stake is the interest and the good of others, as it was in the case of priests' abuse or holocaust.

Let us ask our Lord to give us the courage to forgive one another as he forgave us our sins on the cross.

Sirach 27: 30-28: 7; Romans 14: 7-9; Matthew 18: 21-35



Homily Date: September 17, 2023
© 2023 – Fr Felicien I. Mbala, PhD, STD
Contact: www.mbala.org
Document Name: 20230917homily