



"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“" (Matthew 18:28).

**24th Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 14, 2014**

First Reading: Sirach 27:30-28:9

- ³⁰ Anger and wrath, these also are abominations,
yet a sinner holds on to them [hugs them tight].
- ¹ The vengeful will face the Lord's vengeance,
for he keeps a strict account of their sins.
- ² Forgive your neighbor the wrong he has done,
and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray.
- ³ Does anyone harbor anger against another,
and expect healing from the Lord?
- ⁴ If someone has no mercy towards another like himself,
can he then seek pardon for his own sins?
- ⁵ If a mere mortal harbors wrath,
who will make an atoning sacrifice for his sins?
- ⁶ Remember the end of your life, and set enmity aside;
remember corruption and death, and be true to the commandments.
- ⁷ Remember the commandments, and do not be angry with your neighbor;
remember the covenant of the Most High, and overlook faults.
- ⁸ Refrain from strife, and your sins will be fewer;
for the hot-tempered kindle strife,
⁹ and the sinner disrupts friendships
and sows discord among those who are at peace.

Psalm 103:1-12

- ¹ Bless the Lord, O my soul,
and all that is within me,
bless his holy name.
- ² Bless the Lord, O my soul,
and do not forget all his benefits—
- ³ who forgives all your iniquity,
who heals all your diseases,
- ⁴ who redeems your life from the Pit,
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,
- ⁵ who satisfies you with good as long as you live
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.
- ⁶ The Lord works vindication
and justice for all who are oppressed.
- ⁷ He made known his ways to Moses,
his acts to the people of Israel.
- ⁸ The Lord is merciful and gracious,

slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
⁹ He will not always accuse,
nor will he keep his anger forever.
¹⁰ He does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.
¹¹ For as the heavens are high above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love towards those who fear him;
¹² as far as the east is from the west,
so far he removes our transgressions from us.

Second Reading: Romans 14:7-9

⁷ We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves.

⁸ If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.

⁹ For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

Gospel Reading: Matthew 18:21-35

²¹ Then Peter came and said to him, „Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?”

²² Jesus said to him, ***Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.***

²³ ***„For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.***

²⁴ ***When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him;***

²⁵ ***and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made.***

²⁶ ***So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything."***

²⁷ ***And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.***

28 But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe."

29 Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you."

30 But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt.

31 When his fellow-slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place.

32 Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.

33 Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?"

34 And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt.

35 So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

Homily

The parable of the wicked merciless slave is one which only appears in the Gospel of Matthew, going into depth of what is owed when one person has wronged another. It takes us another step further than our study from last week's scripture where we learned that first and foremost, there must be a commitment to be in the Christian community and to continue in it in order to fully reap the benefits of two or three of us coming together to pray for our needs, for reconciliation, and healing.

In the Gospel of Luke we are told if someone sins against us seven times in one day, and repents seven times, we must forgive him or her. Perhaps we can think of someone who, over and over, does something that we find annoying and irritating and where they are disrespecting us in some way. This tends to make me think of ongoing relationships where we must learn to tolerate human weakness that is replayed over and over coupled with an underlying intention to do right.

And now, in the Gospel of Matthew, we are told that we must forgive – not seven times as suggested by the Apostle Peter -- but seventy times seven – in essence, there is no limit or end to our requirement to forgive. Now in Jewish numerical symbolism seven was considered the number of completeness and perfection – the world had been

created in seven days. But the number 70, a tenfold of the sacred 7 reminds us of the biblical accounting of our lifespan, —threescore and ten (Psalm 90:10). In other words, we must forgive throughout our lives!

But some debts are so great that they are impossible to repay. The figure used in the parable of ten thousand talents is astronomical. In our world, we have no idea what this means, so it may be useful to explain the term. One talent was equal to six thousand denarii, and each denarius was one day's earnings. Ancient Mediterranean culture expert, John Pilch,¹ from Georgetown University tells us that ten thousand talents would have required more than 164, 000 years of seven days-per-week work!

In the ancient Middle Eastern culture, —*sin* also could have a somewhat different meaning than we usually apply to the word. It could be interpreted as shaming someone. Theirs was not a money-based culture but one centered on interpersonal relationships of receiving and giving favors. If someone granted you a favor, it was like money in the bank for them, much more than we think of today because you would have to repay. It would be very shameful for anyone not to fulfill these obligations and it might well be perceived as disrespectful and an insult.

Sin could mean that one has shamed God or one who has shamed another person. Normally, in their ancient mid-eastern culture, such shame would be followed by seeking revenge. We see in the Gospel that forgiveness is often framed as foregoing retribution. We might not view it exactly the same way in our world. But regardless of time and culture, that basic impulse to —get back at those who harm us is still an underlying reaction. Feeling aggrieved and put down in our world may lead us to fantasies of some kind of revenge. Some of you may remember the magazine ads for Dewar's Scotch about —*the best revenge is living well?* Here, it is the imagined come-uppance that our competitors or enemies would feel if they could *only see how much we have surpassed them*. Then they would be so envious of us!

In the First Reading in Sirach, God had a right to revenge when shamed by the action of human beings. We could not stand it if He exacted such revenge (Leviticus 26:1-16). We are reminded of our end and his call to overlook the faults of others (Sirach 28:7). The ancient holy teacher, Ben Sira (Sirach) who was writing his book about 180 BCE in Jerusalem discussed forgiveness in a way that comes closest to Jesus' standard. He speaks of one's natural impulse to hold on to the wrong done to us, another translation being to —*hug tight*. Yes, sometimes we may even take *a certain pleasure* in feeling that someone else has wronged us.

In our Second Reading in Romans, as we are learning in our weekly Bible Study on the Book of Romans at St. Matthew, 'sin' may best be described as a breach, a break or separation from God and others. It is a desolation, a loss of relationship. This is what the Lord hates — not the person — but the loss. It is hard to understand perhaps, but the Lord takes on the pain of our loss if we surrender to him. This is the meaning of the Cross.

In today's Gospel, the merciless slave is thought to have been someone who had held some very high position of trust with his master because he owed such a huge amount that it could not have occurred without his having had access to great assets. So, his Master would have had to have faith in his servant's loyalty. Actually, in Jesus' world, the listener to this parable would have immediately realized that impossible amounts were involved. The story contrasts the paltry sum that he was owed with the astronomical amount that he owed.

So forgiveness is a decision, and showing mercy *even when* the injury perpetrated by the other was perceived as of great magnitude and deliberately done. Forgiveness opens one to being vulnerable and taking a risk, trusting one's self to handle the possibility of being hurt or betrayed yet again. Forgiveness is choosing to accept the mistakes and flaws of others graciously. Yes, and the risk! And forgiveness is a choice to love!² And yes, if we do let the wrong go, indeed, we are opening ourselves to a repetition of being hurt; why else would we be enjoined to forgive so many times? The underlying message is that being hurt is part and parcel of living with other human beings and something we have to learn to live with and to get past.

And why would we choose to forgive? Some cultures and religions speak of the Law of Karma, a mystery which is expressed in different ways, but Jesus put it this way: ***"The measure you measure out is the measure you will be given."***

But we know that in our own power, often we are not capable of forgiving. What can help us to allow the Holy Spirit to take us to another level? If we ourselves are truly grateful for having been forgiven and healed, then the fruit of such blessing will be to freely offer it to others. If we refuse to accept the full benefit of being forgiven and healed, we are enthroning resentment and withholding of love as our preferred reality. We are rejecting love, refusing to give it and this will make it impossible to also receive it. If we cannot give it up and accept God's vast and limitless love, we will fall further and further into spiritual debt. St. Augustine said, *"If we think of our sins, reckoning up those we have committed by sight, hearing, thought, and countless disorderly emotions, I do not know whether we can even sleep without falling into debt."*³

We are told not to let the sun go down on our wrath, which is wise advice because as time goes on, we all have a tendency to rewrite history, to selectively remember what actually happened – thinking that we remember accurately the most minute mistakes of the other person -- but our own errors tend to fade, to become obscured, rationalized away or denied. This tendency to project blame and to see others' mistakes as large and our own as small was captured in another piece of exorbitant biblical advice, that we should remove the log in our own eye before we try to remove the splinter from our neighbor's eye.

Most important as Paul tells us in today's Second Reading, we do not live alone or in isolation. We can't separate ourselves from our past, present, or future. Whether we live or die, Christ is Lord of the living and the dead, and so whether here and now, or then, in this perspective we must forgive because we ourselves, like everyone else, will die and we only have limited opportunity to offer forgiveness. Ultimately this is the final

way in which we can love others.

The lessons are perhaps most difficult in close relationships such as family, close friends, work associates, and especially in our faith communities. Perhaps we've gone through such hurt that we feel we have to leave the marriage, cut off the family member or friend, to depart from the church, to stop talking to someone in the neighborhood or at work. Why? I think that it is the fear of opening ourselves to the possibility of being hurt again that leads us to close ourselves off. This is the openness and vulnerability where we can only imperfectly imitate Christ, who knew what was coming and he nevertheless went back to Jerusalem, and from the Cross cried out, **"Father forgive them for they know not what they do."**

It is the anniversary of 9/11, where an overwhelming need for retribution was brought on thousands of innocent people and, extending outward, to their families and friends. May we spend time this day praying for those who were harmed, including the families of the men who boarded our planes, seated themselves among our citizens, and drove themselves and our people to their deaths. Let us pray for people everywhere regardless of their faith tradition or lack thereof to follow Jesus' path, and give up the need for retribution and revenge.

***Are
we our own
creator and master?
God forbid such a fate!***

***God, Creator of the universe
You made us in love, truly,
without limits or reserve.
Let us spend our lives
Loving you and our neighbor
In Christ.
Amen.***