

To Forgive Is Divine

Sir. 27: 30 - 28: 7; Rom. 14: 7-9; Matt. 18: 21-35

When I was a young man many, many years ago, I decided to move into an apartment. I borrowed my uncle's truck to move some furniture. Somehow, during the move, I clipped a concrete wall and damaged the front bumper, fender and head light on the truck. You can imagine my fear as I returned the keys to my uncle and told him of the damage that I had inflicted.

I could tell that my uncle was not happy but he didn't scream. He didn't yell. He didn't lecture me. He simply took his keys back and continued with what he was doing. I offered to pay him for the damage but he just waved me away saying: 'If I couldn't afford to pay for the damage, I wouldn't have lent you the truck.' He never mentioned the incident again.

My uncle's forgiveness and mercy were a great relief to a frightened young man so that, almost fifty years later, I still remember my uncle for it. He taught me to forgive.

In the Gospel for this Sunday, Jesus speaks to Peter about forgiveness. Peter asks Jesus if someone sins against him, should he forgive them as much as seven times? Jesus tells him that he has to forgive seventy-seven times. Clearly, Peter has understood the concept of forgiveness, but Jesus tells him that he needs to go farther. Jesus says that he has to continue to forgive. As many times as someone sins against him, he must forgive. He must forgive without limit.

Jesus goes on to tell the parable of the master who forgave the large debt of his slave but the slave, in turn, would not forgive the small debt of another slave. Because of the lack of mercy shown by the first slave, the master had him tortured until he could pay his entire debt. Jesus said that we need to forgive the sins of our brothers and sisters from our hearts otherwise our heavenly Father will punish us also.

The Gospel tells us that when we receive mercy and forgiveness, it must change us. It must make us more forgiving of others. If it doesn't, then we risk the punishment of God.

Also, Jesus tells us that we must forgive 'from our hearts'. It is not enough that we forgive. It is not enough that we forgive seventy-seven times. We have to forgive ungrudgingly. We can't forgive simply out of a sense of duty or obligation. We must do so sincerely without a trace of ill-will in our hearts. But we know that to do this is very difficult.

But this is what God does for us when we approach Him in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. No matter how many times we sin, He offers us forgiveness; not seven times, not seventy-seven times, but as many times as necessary; an infinite number of times if need be. And when we receive God's unmerited gift of forgiveness, it should transform our hearts so that we can be more forgiving of others. After all, we have the supreme example of Jesus, as He hung on the Cross, imploring His Father to forgive His persecutors when He said: 'Forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.'

The author of the Book of Sirach lived approximately 200 years before Christ. He observed much strife, discord, vengeance, and anger among the Jewish people and a lack of mercy and forgiveness. In response, he said this:

Forgive your neighbour the wrong that is done, and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray. If one has no mercy toward another like oneself,

can one then seek pardon for one's own sins? Remember the end of your life, and set enmity aside; remember corruption and death, and be true to the commandments.

My uncle was not a religious person but I'd like to think that his example of mercy and forgiveness was counted on the right side of God's ledger. As written in the Book of Sirach, let us remember the end of our lives and set enmity aside. Let us forgive those who have sinned against us, but if we find it impossible to forgive, let us ask the Lord to fill our hearts with mercy and forgiveness so that we may do the impossible.