

“Don’t Monkey Around With Forgiveness”

24th Sunday of Ordinary Time [A]

Sir 27:30-28:7; Ps 103:1-4, 9-12; Rom 14:7-9; Jn 13:34; Mt 18:21-35

Perhaps you’ve heard of this fascinating way to trap a monkey:

- You take an enticing lure, maybe a sumptuous piece of fruit
 - and place it inside a container that’s securely anchored.
 - The container has an opening just large enough
 - for the monkey to slip his hand thru and grab the prize.
- However, the opening is also just small enough
 - that once the monkey has the fruit in hand
 - he’s unable to get his hand back out of the container.
- So the only way he can get out of this predicament
 - is to let go of the fruit...
- And therein lies the monkey’s dilemma
 - For as much as he would like to be free,
 - he really wants that banana too...
 - And as he becomes stubbornly bent on not letting go of the fruit
 - he is paradoxically trapped – by his own free will no less –
 - and soon falls victim to the hunter...
- Despite holding the object of his desire in his hand,
 - he will never be satisfied by it and he remains trapped
 - only by his unwillingness to just let it go...
- We may shake our heads at the hapless monkey
 - but if we’re not careful we can easily fall victim to a similar spiritual trap...

Today our Scripture readings lead us, for the second week in a row

- into the very important (and often very difficult) subject of Forgiveness

Which might beg the question: Why? Why such emphasis on Forgiveness?

- Well there are at least two big reasons:
 - First, rather unique among world religions
 - Forgiveness is a central tenet of our Christian faith --
 - our whole Redemption is wrapped in the Mercy of God.
 - Forgiveness is spoken of well over 100 times in Scripture.
 - Secondly, forgiveness is also a critical component of healing
 - the healing of broken relationships
 - with our God, with each other, and even with ourselves.
 - For true reconciliation to take place
 - Forgiveness is not just a “nice to have”
 - It is indeed a prerequisite –
 - Complete healing simply cannot occur without it.

The problem is of course, Forgiveness can be a very difficult thing for us to live out...

We live in a sinful world.

- *“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”* (Rom 3:23)
- And when you take 7.5 billion sinners and turn ‘em loose on planet Earth
 - goaded on by Satan to boot...
 - Well it doesn’t take long for us to start hurting one another
- By our actions & by our words...
 - sometimes quite unintentionally,
 - Other times we know full well...

- And when someone hurts us, our instinctive response is...
 - It's payback time..!

Yes, and the more you hurt me, the more I'm gonna hurt you

- Whether in a direct confrontation or passive aggression
 - behind the scenes gossiping or a cold shoulder,
 - or a myriad of other ways I might think of
 - Bottom line: I will have my revenge
 - You will suffer for what you did to me....

On a macro scale, this has led to wars between countries & cultures

- But closer to home, it can also wreak havoc
 - on our friendships, in our families,
 - in our schools & workplace, in our parishes

And right where our gut instinct is to strike back, Jesus calls us to forgive....

- even weaving it into the prayer He taught us, that we pray together at every Mass:

"Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us..."
- Our reluctance to forgive reminds me
 - of what Jesus said a couple of weeks ago when chastising Peter:
 - *"You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do..."* (Mt 16:23)
- God's radical mercy is indeed difficult for us to process
 - yet He commands that we follow His lead...

And so our Gospel reading begins today with Peter asking Jesus -- rather innocently I think --

- just how many times we should forgive someone.
- "As many as 7 times?" he asked (which probably seemed rather generous)

- Jesus replies: No Peter, not just 7 times, but 77 times!
 - “77 times” is not to be taken literally
 - Offense #78 does not mean it’s open season on all offenders..!
 - It’s an ancient Hebrew expression meaning “always”
 - We find it in find it in several places in Scripture
 - as early as Gen 4 (Gen 4:15,24)
 - At any rate, Jesus is telling Peter we are to forgive always, without end...

Seeking to drive the point home

- Jesus offers the “Parable of the Unmerciful Servant”
- in which the King forgave the debt of a servant who owed him
 - “a huge amount”
- Freed from his debt, this servant then turned around
 - and refused to forgive the debt of a fellow servant
 - who owed him “a much smaller amount.”
- The Greek translation gives us a more detailed accounting:
 - the “huge amount” owed to the king was
 - 10,000 talents
 - 1 talent = 15-20 years of wages for a laborer
 - Many thousands of years’ wages
 - Contrast this with the “much smaller amount” owed to the servant
 - 100 denarii
 - 1 denarius was one day’s wage for a laborer
 - 3+ months wages
 - Thousands of years of debt – a few months of debt...
 - Jesus is showing the huge disparity between

- the forgiveness of God
- and the forgiveness of man
- God forgave a debt of sin owed by mankind
 - that we could never hope to repay
- Yet like the unmerciful servant we are often at each other's throats
 - over things that may require some patience yes
 - but that are often trivial in the grand scheme of things.
- Suffice it to say that for followers of Jesus,
 - the days of *"an eye for eye, a tooth for tooth"* (Ex 21:24) are over.
 - The Mercy shown by the King is expected to be carried forward by his servants...
 - We are called, if you will, to "pay it forward."

So what is forgiveness?

- Forgiveness is, as the Gospel perfectly illustrates w/ the king:
 - I release you from your debt to me, regardless of how great...
 - vice the Pay me back what you owe, regardless of how small...
 - Forgiveness is stepping outside of the vengeful cycle of tit-for-tat retribution.
 - In my heart, I am no longer holding this against you...

Oftentimes when in trying to define something, it can be helpful to say what it isn't...

- To forgive someone does NOT mean:
 - "Forgive & forget" – that you won't remember the incident
 - that it's okay what they did to you; that you in any way condone it.
 - It doesn't mean that you're not still wounded or scarred
 - It does not necessarily mean that you can now trust that person again

- Indeed, depending on the circumstances,
 - it may not be prudent to trust that person again.
- Does not necessarily mean that you have this feeling of forgiveness...
 - You may, you may not
 - but Forgiveness is not an emotion
 - It is a conscious decision despite your emotion....

So what's the big deal? Why does Jesus set such a high bar on this forgiveness thing?

Because: unforgiveness, vengefulness, holding on to that grudge

- is inherently Divisive
- and, it is a barrier against Healing.

Where there is division -- very often, Satan is lurking

- He who provoked the hurtful action of one
- Then seeks to agitate the wound in the other,
- keeping it alive and festering, stoking the flames of resentment
 - thus ensuring division and a lack of reconciliation.

And so Jesus rightly challenges us to forgive:

- In Matt ch 5, He says that before offering our gifts on the altar
 - we should "*first go and be reconciled*" with our brother,
 - then come back (Mt 5:23-24)
 - How often are we quick to apologize to God & ask for forgiveness,
 - and yet how slowly (if ever) do we apologize & seek reconciliation
 - with each other...??
 - Why do we often apologize to God for treating someone poorly
 - but then do not also apologize to the person we offended...

- We reconcile with God (and that's great)
 - but we rarely reconcile with each other (and that's not so great)
- In Matt ch 6, Jesus goes so far as to say that
 - unless you forgive others, the Father will not forgive you.... (Mt 6:15)

I don't think Jesus means this as some kind of ultimatum or threat – “do this or else...”

- I think it's simply speaking to a spiritual reality:
 - Just as light and darkness cannot fill the same room
 - Forgiveness & unforgiveness, mercy & vengefulness
 - cannot fill the same heart...
 - The graces & gifts we receive from our God
 - are intended to fill us and flow thru us to others, like a watering can.
 - If our watering can is full of mud, it can't be filled with water...

CONCLUSION

Christ has taught us, “Give and it shall be given” (Lk 6:38)

- Today He reminds us, “Forgive and it shall be forgiven” (Mt 6:14)

Is it easy? Nope, not even maybe -- certainly not at first

But the HS compels us this a.m.: Let it go

- I challenge you, before you leave here today
- to examine your heart for any unforgiveness, grudge, vengefulness
- and make the *conscious decision* to let it go:
 - “Father, I release them from my debt;
 - I will no longer harbor this resentment in my heart
 - I will no longer be seeking retribution...”

Do this, and allow the Light of Christ to illuminate your heart

Do this and open the door

- to Healing and the Reconciliation of broken relationships.

Let it go or by your own free will

- like our conflicted monkey – you will remain perilously trapped,
- And what a victory that would be for the hunter of souls...

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