

Ordinary 24, Year A
MATT 18:21-35
September 11, 2011

I would have been quite happy had the 18th chapter of Matthew ended with the reading we heard last week in church. It was the one about how, if your brother/sister sins against you, you have the right to confront that person alone -- next, to confront them with several others -- and finally, to confront them in front of the whole church. Matthew ends with a flourish, saying that if the person still denies their sin, you can totally write them off.

Today, Jesus pulls a 180 degree shift on us. Today's message is telling us that we must go beyond justice. Beyond the legal process and all the way to forgiveness.

Jesus reminds us in today's gospel that forgiveness is an essential Christian experience. Our Lord is pointing out again that we must follow His example if we are to be His Church.

We must not forgive others seven times but as in some translations, seventy times seven. For those of you who are counting, that's 490 times.

I'm afraid to say that the real point of what Jesus says is that we shouldn't even be counting at all. I use that word "afraid" because forgiveness is one of the hardest things we are called to do as human beings.

Today may be the perfect test for every American as we remember the September 11th of 10 years ago. I'll be the first to admit that I can understand the difficulty people may have of forgiving the terrorists that used those planes to inflict such a tragedy on our country.

And there are so many other things that are happening, every day, around the world, throughout our country, in our neighborhoods, and even in our family and personal life.

With all that is going on in our sinful world, the easy way out is to become unattached or unconcerned. It's almost as easy as channel surfing until we no longer see the injustices and tragedies that occur every day.

And if we don't see it then we don't have to do anything about it. We don't have to deal with anyone that we don't see commit a sin.

Almost all of us here have been hurt in some way. It's only human for this to happen some time in your life and usually by someone that you wouldn't expect it from.

One thing is for sure: Forgiving is hard! When you are struggling to forgive someone, a helpful thought is that God has forgiven you so powerfully - how can you withhold forgiveness from someone else?

Who do you have to forgive: the neighbor with the barking dogs at 5 o'clock every morning; the boss that didn't give the glowing review that you deserve; the teenager that makes a mistake in judgment that causes you some hardship or heartache; or maybe yourself for being weaker than you think you should be in living your faith life?

This is explained very simply in our first reading of Sirach. If you forgive your neighbor's injustice then your own sins will be forgiven.

But if you harbor anger against another then don't expect healing from the Lord; and if you refuse mercy to another then don't seek pardon for yourself".

I must give you a personal story to fully explain how forgiveness is hard but rewarding, too. Last year, someone close to me hurt me so badly that my Irish temper was heard for blocks. I can count on one hand the number of times in my long life that my fury was so overpowering that I said and did things that should never be repeated.

I was totally in the right but as they say dead right! I wanted the whole world to know what happened and to join me in my dissatisfaction.

At some point, during Lent, it hit me that I was getting tired of carrying around all this discontent to the detriment of my physical, mental and spiritual health.

I sat down with a blank card and simply wrote: I forgive you and wish you and your family a very Happy and Holy Easter. Then signed it Love, Mickey.

At that very moment, I felt that yoke of adversity lifted completely from my shoulders. Such a feeling of relief and calm filled me that I was almost mad at myself for waiting so long to do this.

I had still been wronged but now feel very right in letting go of the judgment that was not mine to make. I can just "Let go - Let God!"

Many thousands times worse is the actions that were done to us 10 years ago, just as the even worse Holocaust event of over 60 years ago.

We must follow the life example of our Lord, Jesus, by forgiving any and all atrocities just as He forgave those who were nailing Him to the Cross.

God forgives because God is a forgiving God, not because anyone deserves forgiveness. Believing this as we do, how can anyone not forgive and still expect God to forgive us.

Soon we will recite the words in the Our Father, “. . . forgive us our trespasses, AS WE Forgive those who trespass against us”. We won't say, “instead of forgiving those who trespass against us”. We won't say, “. . . forgive us and then forgive everyone else”.

The last verse of today's gospel reading sums it all up for us: “So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives your brother from your heart”.