

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost – 17 Sep 2023

Romans 14:1-12

1 Welcome those who are weak in faith, but do not argue with them about their personal opinions. 2 Some people's faith allows them to eat anything, but the person who is weak in the faith eats only vegetables. 3 The person who will eat anything is not to despise the one who doesn't; while the one who eats only vegetables is not to pass judgment on the one who will eat anything; for God has accepted that person. 4 Who are you to judge the servants of someone else? It is their own Master who will decide whether they succeed or fail. And they will succeed, because the Lord is able to make them succeed. 5 Some people think that a certain day is more important than other days, while others think that all days are the same. We each should firmly make up our own minds. 6 Those who think highly of a certain day do so in honour of the Lord; those who will eat anything do so in honour of the Lord, because they give thanks to God for the food. Those who refuse to eat certain things do so in honour of the Lord, and they give thanks to God. 7 We do not live for ourselves only, and we do not die for ourselves only. 8 If we live, it is for the Lord that we live, and if we die, it is for the Lord that we die. So whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. 9 For Christ died and rose to life in order to be the Lord of the living and of the dead. 10 You then, who eat only vegetables—why do you pass judgment on others? And you who eat anything—why do you despise other believers? All of us will stand before God to be judged by him. 11 For the scripture says,
"As surely as I am the living God, says the Lord,
everyone will kneel before me,
and everyone will confess that I am God."
12 Every one of us, then, will have to give an account to God.

Matthew 18:21-35

21 Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, if my brother keeps on sinning against me, how many times do I have to forgive him? Seven times?" 22 "No, not seven times," answered Jesus, "but seventy times seven, 23 because the kingdom of heaven is like this. Once there was a king who decided to check on his servants' accounts. 24 He had just begun to do so when one of them was brought in who owed him millions of dollars. 25 The servant did not have enough to pay his debt, so the king ordered him to be sold as a slave, with his wife and his children and all that he had, in order to pay the debt. 26 The servant fell on his knees before the king. "Be patient with me," he begged, "and I will pay you everything!" 27 The king felt sorry for him, so he forgave him the debt and let him go. 28 "Then the man went out and met one of his fellow servants who owed him a few dollars. He grabbed him and started choking him. "Pay back what you owe me!" he said. 29 His fellow servant fell down and begged him, "Be patient with me, and I will pay you back!" 30 But he refused; instead, he had him thrown into jail until he should pay the debt. 31 When the other servants saw what had happened, they were very upset and went to the king and told him everything. 32 So he called the

servant in. "You worthless slave!" he said. "I forgave you the whole amount you owed me, just because you asked me to. 33 You should have had mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you.' 34 The king was very angry, and he sent the servant to jail to be punished until he should pay back the whole amount." 35 And Jesus concluded, "That is how my Father in heaven will treat every one of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

Focus: Being merciful and forgiving to others as God is to us.

Function: To help listeners understand that God's mercy and grace need to be lived out and shared with others.

Last Sunday's Gospel reading talked about resolving conflicts between church members, reminding us of the need to love one another as ourselves and to reconcile with the other, resolving any dispute immediately, and privately if possible. With this context in mind, today's Gospel reading leads us to another essential aspect of personal and communal life, and that is forgiveness because, without forgiveness, no reconciliation is genuine and the relationship will still be estranged.

It is natural, and all too common, that during any conflicts, hurtful words are said, betrayal happens, and possibly physical fights as well. We have heard that the disciples argued and quarrelled among themselves.

So, we hear Simon Peter ask, "Lord, if my brother keeps sinning against me, how many times do I have to forgive him?" By this question, perhaps Peter was trying to know the extent to which they could stop being the nice guys; when would be considered enough; when they could stop having to resolve any further conflicts, and reconcile with and forgive the other.

Just imagine what Peter and the other disciples would feel when they learnt that it was Judas Iscariot who had betrayed Jesus and them such that Jesus was arrested and killed, and they lost their messiah and king. How had they forgiven him?

When Peter said, "Seven times," he could be thinking that they would be extraordinarily gracious in forgiving the other, which should be more than enough. So we may presume that they had graciously forgiven Judas.

Suppose someone betrayed our trust and hurt us badly emotionally, besides causing us significant financial losses. Will you forgive the offender? Why yes? Or why not?

What is the purpose or the work of forgiveness? Is forgiveness given only when the perpetrator shows signs of repentance? Does the act of forgiveness release the wrongdoer from guilt, or free the sufferer from the burden of ill feelings, or both, leading to reconciliation? What if the offender displays no sense of remorse, oblivious to the hurt inflicted on others? Will that behaviour affect our extent of forgiveness?

Let us take this as an example:

A woman became a single mother after divorcing her husband, who cheated on her by having affairs with a much younger woman. She has to get back to the workforce to raise three young children, and every month is a struggle to pay bills and bring food to the table. She's angry with her ex that she has to tell her children they have no money for movies or dining out while he's enjoying life with his new wife. Life seems unfair and unkind to her. Besides praying that she and her children would be free from these daily struggles soon, she hopes that her ex will be miserable in his new marriage. So, how will forgiveness help her?

It seems like she does not want to forgive her ex, thinking that forgiveness will free him from the guilt towards her and the children. She wants to punish him by holding him as the cause and source of their current struggles and misery. She may even be frequently reminding her children about 'this reality,' especially when she is upset. What would you do if you were in her shoes?

In the field of psychology, the key obstacle to forgiving the offender is not wishing them well, not wanting to see them being released from the liability of our sufferings and ill feelings when we forgive. We want them to suffer because of what they did. The idea that the other person would somehow feel better due to our forgiveness challenges our peace, and we instinctively disallow that to happen. We think by not forgiving, we are punishing the other with the suffering of guilt, which is something we have control over, and at the same time, a way of reminding ourselves of the hurt and the wrong inflicted on us. This thinking is heightened further if the offender insists they have done nothing wrong, are unwilling to take responsibility for their actions, and show no remorse or apology. When faced with this, all the more, we will withhold forgiveness, which becomes our justification for our plight in being treated unjustly.

Despite these being the study of human psychology, Jesus has something else in mind about how we should react when someone hurts us.

In the Bible, the Greek word translated as "forgive" or "pardon" literally means "to let go", as when a person does not demand payment for a debt anymore. So, the definition of forgiveness is essentially the act of pardoning an offender. This is demonstrated clearly in the parable in today's Gospel reading when the king forgave the servant's enormous debt; his debt was erased entirely. By that, Jesus

is teaching us that forgiving others means letting go of any resentment and giving up any claim to be compensated for the hurt or loss we have suffered.

However, this parable is commonly understood as God has forgiven us, so we *must* forgive others. In other words, God is commanding us to forgive others immediately. This aligns with Jesus's teaching in the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us the wrongs we have done, as we forgive the wrongs that others have done to us" (6:12).

This is theologically true, however, imposing this teaching on the sufferers of conflicts that they *must* forgive the offenders immediately is pastorally insensitive and life-stifling, in my opinion. Any wound needs time and God's grace to heal.

This parable's focus should be mercy instead because that is what the kingdom of heaven is like as the parable alludes to. We ought to be merciful because God is merciful to us. However often we have willfully disobeyed God, God mercifully forgives us. Therefore, we ought to be grateful to God and imitate God in being merciful and forgiving towards people who have mistreated us. However, to do that, we have nothing of our own to rely on but the unconditional love (or the agape love) of Christ since it "does not keep a record of wrongs" (1 Corinthians 13:5). I believe this is what Jesus's reply to Peter to forgive others seventy times seven means – to be life-giving as we forgive others ongoingly, forgiving from the heart.

Moreover, this life-giving grace in forgiveness is not only benefited by the offender but, most importantly, for the sufferer. Since to forgive means to let go, therefore, besides letting go of the offender, Jesus wants the sufferer to let go of the hurt, anguish, pain, anger, bitterness, etc. – all ill feelings that have weighed us down emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually. Letting go does not mean forgetting or ignoring the negative impact the offender has inflicted on us. On the contrary, we must acknowledge and confront the harm and hurt the offender has caused us before we can let go. The reality is that as much as we think we are holding the wrongdoer in guilt by not forgiving, we are imprisoning ourselves in ill feelings. That is why we are urged to forgive when we have been wronged so that we may receive the healing grace from Christ.

In the example of the single mother taking care of three young children, she is entrapped by pain and hurt that she is always unhappy as she struggles to provide for her children. If she could find in Christ the agape love to let go of that pain and hurt, she could find a new life with her children, free from such burdens, free from anger against her ex, free to treasure time with her children, and free to discover love again. In Christ, she could draw strength to face life's challenges as she makes a living to raise her children. Even though she may still be unable to bring her children to the movies or dine out, she will be happier to spend the best time with them.

As much as the sufferer forgives, it is essential that the offender has the humility to ask for forgiveness to effect any reconciliation. Reconciliation requires both parties willing to come together.

What has been your experience?

Have you been hurt by someone and that hurt is still lingering in you?

Are you being weighed down by guilt for having offended someone, especially your loved ones?

If you could get a piece of paper and a pen handy.

May I invite you to ponder the name(s) of the person whom you wish to forgive, and/or from whom you hope to ask for forgiveness, or someone you know who is entangled in such situations?

Take your time, prayerfully ponder, and write down the names.

And whenever you are ready, may I invite you to offer this paper to God as your prayer. As you do that, let Christ's healing grace and peace fill you or the persons for whom you are praying.

To wrap up, today's first reading from Romans 14 reminds us not to be self-opinionated such that we judge and accuse one another based on what we think. In verses 7-8, Paul says, "We do not live for ourselves only, and we do not die for ourselves only. If we live, it is for the Lord that we live, and if we die, it is for the Lord that we die. So whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord." Indeed, we are accountable to God by how we live as we are the many parts of the body of Christ.

So, may we be merciful to one another as God is merciful to us. May we love one another as ourselves. If, unfortunately, we have conflicts with one another, may we be humble to ask for forgiveness, and may we be gracious to forgive, as that not only helps with reconciliation, it frees us from the burden of any ill feelings. May we receive the healing grace of Christ and be filled and live with Christ's agape love in building this community of Christ. Amen.