

Catholic Church of the Beatitudes
Santa Barbara, CA

Homily for the Twenty-Fourth Sunday of the Year
September 14, 2014 (Year A)

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Reflections on
Sirach 27:30 - 28:7; Romans 14:7-9; Matthew 18:21-35

I admit that my first reaction to today's gospel reading was to leave out or ignore the parable about the unforgiving servant, with its ending about sending the servant off to the torturers. I would prefer to concentrate instead on the saying about forgiving seventy-times-seven times. To me there is too much cognitive dissonance between the two parts of the reading.

What do we do with the bits of scripture that we don't like? There is a lot we don't know about the original circumstances in which Jesus may have said these words. After all, he probably told the same stories over and over again in his travels to different communities, and one community may have heard and remembered his parables differently from another. What words did Jesus actually use in the original Aramaic language of everyday speech? What tone of voice did he use? What was the context in which he spoke?

Matthew's gospel places this parable in a series of stories about church order and discipline, which was obviously an issue of concern for his community. As you may remember, last week's reading, which immediately precedes today's gospel, was about how to handle a church member who does something wrong – first have a one-on-one conversation, then take two or three witnesses along with you, and then bring the matter before the whole community. So the tone of this parable may be more reflective of Matthew's agenda than of what Jesus actually said.

There is one important factor that we are likely to miss, because of our cultural assumptions: *the unreality of the story*. Jesus's and Matthew's original audiences would have caught the absurdity of the first servant's debt. Our translation attempts to convey this by saying that he owed "tens of millions of dollars." That is a very large sum, but, after all, Bernie Madoff cheated his investors out of billions of dollars, so ten million doesn't seem nearly absurd enough.

The original Greek of Matthew's gospel doesn't help us here, either. "Ten thousand talents" does not mean much to us. Ten thousand of anything doesn't sound big in a language that has words for millions and billions and trillions, but *ten thousand was, in fact, the biggest number* that ancient Greek had. The word is "*myriad*," which, then as now, often is used to mean "more than you can count." And a "talent" was vastly bigger than a dollar or a euro or a pound sterling. The Jewish historian of Jesus's time, Josephus, tells us that the entire annual revenue from Jewish taxes was all of 600 talents. So do the math: the first servant's debt is fifteen to twenty times the entire yearly income from the nation's taxes—all owed by a single individual!

This story-telling technique reminds me of what we find in comic books or cartoon strips: comic exaggeration combined with outsized acts of violence that no one mistakes for reality. Maybe Jesus is trying to reach the twelve-year-old in each of us!

Of course, the hyperbole has an important point to make as well. The first servant's debt is far beyond any human scale, as is the mercy that is received when the debt is forgiven. This is boundless, divine mercy. The second servant's debt is on an ordinary human scale: 100 denarii, or several months' wages for a laborer. Yet, the parable links the two together. Boundless divine mercy for us is tied to human mercy among ourselves. As we pray every day (perhaps with a different translation), "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."

But let us return to Peter's question about how many times we must forgive, remembering that he has just been asking about a church member's misconduct.

Peter undoubtedly thought he was being generous when he proposed forgiving seven times. He was probably taken aback when Jesus replied, "not seven, but seventy times seven." Peter didn't want to be a patsy, or be taken advantage of. He didn't want the church of which he was "the rock" to be misused either. We do have to set limits, don't we?

But perhaps Jesus is making a different point. We assume that Peter was talking about a repeat offender and a cycle of offense and forgiveness with the potential to repeat itself endlessly. But perhaps Jesus wants us to abandon our focus on the offender and look at ourselves. What if our task is to keep on forgiving someone seventy times seven times *for the same offense*?

Our first reading addresses an all-too-human tendency:

- Wrath and anger are hateful things, yet the sinner *holds them tight* . . .
- Should you *nourish anger* against your neighbor . . . ?
- If you who are but flesh *cherish wrath*, who will forgive your sins?

It is too easy for us to feed our resentments. Even if we have verbally forgiven someone, we may find ourselves tied to a desire that they meet their comeuppance. This is a trap! It

binds our happiness to that of the person who has offended us in a zero-sum game. I can only be happy, I can only obtain "closure" if the other gets the punishment he or she deserves! Unwillingness to forgive preoccupies us and saps our energies. Ironically, it gives too much power to the other party.

Forgiveness releases us from all this negative energy. So when we forgive, we are the first to benefit, whether or not the other can receive our forgiveness or reciprocate it. In his recent book, *The Book of Forgiving*, Desmond Tutu and his daughter Mpho state this truth over and over again: "In our own ways, we are all broken. Out of that brokenness, we hurt others. Forgiveness is the journey we take toward healing the broken parts. It is how we become whole again."

This is not an easy process. It is not a fast process. It takes time and effort, and quite possibly repetition: seventy times seven. Archbishop Tutu knows this on both the personal level and on the ethnic and national level. South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which he chaired, was designed, he writes, "to save our country from certain destruction" while the pernicious system of apartheid was being dismantled. It was a time when long buried resentments could easily have boiled over and launched a bloody cycle of revenge.

As we contemplate the world around us, on the personal, national, international, religious, or ethnic level, it is easy to find places where forgiveness and reconciliation are needed. What is harder to find is a way to go about the long and difficult process of forgiving.

Archbishop Tutu and his daughter, a priest in her own right, have shown us a path. It starts with truth-telling as a first step, exploring honestly what happened, and being willing to hear what happened from all sides, including that of the perpetrator.

The next step is to name the hurt. This is where it really gets personal. We have to face

our grief and our loss, as well as our anger, which is often an easier emotion to feel.

These first two steps require a place of safety, both physical and psychological, a place where we can be confident that there will be no re-injury or retaliation, a place where we know our dignity will be protected.

Only after these first two steps have been thoroughly explored and discussed can we move on to a forgiveness that is more than verbal, a forgiveness that liberates, that removes the burden, that unties the bonds that have restricted our lives. If we are fortunate, we can then move on to reconciliation. If that is impossible, for whatever reason, we can still release the relationship, letting it go.

This *place of safety*, where we can tell our stories and name our hurts, is essential to the whole process. Is that not, in fact, what Jesus wanted us to become, both as individuals and as a community of disciples? A place of ref-

uge and of healing for all who are hurting, and for all who need forgiveness. How can we, as the Church of the Beatitudes, help this happen?

Today's readings are a call to turn away from whatever makes us turn in on ourselves, from whatever grievances we nourish, because Jesus has freed us to live by and for something greater, something vastly more empowering and enriching, which he called the reign of God. As St. Paul says in the second reading:

We do not live for ourselves, nor do we die for ourselves.

While we live, we live for Christ Jesus, and when we die, we die for Christ Jesus.

Both in life and in death we belong to Christ.

That is very good news indeed!