

Catholic Church of the Beatitudes
Santa Barbara, CA

Homily for the 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 16, 2017 (Year A)

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Cultivating a Practice of Forgiveness
Sirach 27:30 - 28:7; Romans 14:7-9; Matthew 18:21-35

Did Jesus really say that? Especially the part about God *handing the official over to be tortured*?! It is very strange for God to be likened to a pagan king. Jewish law did not countenance torture, nor the imprisonment of whole families for debt. So Jesus's example is drawn from Gentile practice, with its easy resort to compulsion. So what gives? Did Matthew add that tag line to Jesus' parable? Or were Jesus's words "tongue-in-cheek," like so much of the parable?

There is a strong element of absurdity in the story, which we might miss. "Ten thousand talents" (that is the original text) is an outrageous sum for an individual to owe, equal to many years of the annual revenue of the nation. Here I need to make a confession: I changed our translation, which reads "tens of millions of dollars" to "trillions;" after all, if our president's son-in-law has a \$1.2 billion debt coming due, then "tens of millions" isn't nearly absurd enough!

Perhaps Jesus (or Matthew) is asking the members of the church: "Do you really want to be part of this pagan system, keeping careful track of debts and offenses? Live that way if you choose, and accept the consequences, but that is NOT the reign of God."

The reign of God, and how it is to be lived out in the church, is at the heart of Peter's question in today's reading. As usual, we can be grateful for "reckless Peter" who blurts out exactly what he is thinking: "How far do I (or we) have to push this forgiveness bit?" (Remember that in this section of Matthew's gos-

pel, Peter is being called upon to speak for the church). I imagine that he thinks he is being very generous and noble-hearted, when he suggests seven times, but underneath his words is the thought that "There is a limit, right?"

But Jesus comes back with seventy times seven: essentially there is NO limit. Jesus is not suggesting that we turn a blind eye to wrongdoing, letting people get away with things. But it is certainly a warning to watch our own tendency to keep a balance sheet in our heads and put ourselves in the judge's seat. Because there is something a little judgmental in Peter's question, as if he knows what is right and can judge other people's offenses, as if he can decide if they have finally gone too far . . . and fail to see how he might also be in need of forgiveness.

One of the first things Jesus taught his followers in Matthew's gospel was the prayer *Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors*. I am using the more literal translation, because it is truer to Matthew's gospel, especially in view of the central metaphor of today's reading. It makes the point that we are all "in debt" in one way or another.

We experience this all during our life journey. We begin life "in debt" to our parents and teachers, both because of the nurturance they freely provide and because we all behave badly or inappropriately at times and need forgiveness. In the prime of life we may find ourselves more on the giving end, as with our own children, and perhaps also more on the

forgiving end—or perhaps not; sometimes we find ourselves more on the needing-to-be-forgiven end. And as we age we again feel our “debts”, our dependence on the help and tolerance and, yes, the forgiveness of others.

This makes the practice of forgiveness a central and essential part of Christian life. This is what the “seventy times seven” is about: The awareness that we constantly need both to give and to receive, to forgive and to be forgiven. This is not a calculation, but an attitude, a way of living in community

Today’s reading, like last week’s, has to do with personal issues among church members, both the offenders and those offended. We are not talking about civil law and public justice, which has its own process. Desmond Tutu and his daughter, in their seminal *Book of Forgiving*, address forgiveness in both arenas, showing how personal health and community well-being both depend on forgiving, even in the case of crimes against humanity.

Forgiveness, they tell us, is a process comprised of 4 steps: Telling the story (and listening; facts have to be acknowledged); naming the hurt (because the consequences of the hurtful act have to be understood); granting forgiveness; and renewing the relationship (where possible) or releasing it, letting it go. Tutu’s point is that we are made whole when we can let go of our resentment

Peter’s question suggests that he has in mind a “repeat offender,” perhaps someone who rubs other people the wrong way, or violates rules that have been agreed upon, or persists in pushing his or her own interests to the detriment of others. It is also possible that Peter finds himself in the all-too-common position of having to keep on forgiving someone

for the same offense, because he has not yet completely let go of his anger. In other words, it is possible that part of the problem lies in the person who feels offended, and is unable to forgive fully all at once.

Wrath and anger are hateful things, says Sirach in our first reading, *yet the sinner hugs them tight*. It is interesting how many ways this author has of expressing this thought about “nourishing” and “cherishing” anger. The point is the same as Jesus’s: that God’s forgiveness of us requires that we forgive others. All the more reason to cultivate, to practice, an attitude of forgiveness.

Peter, by this point in the gospel, has been designated by Jesus as the rock on which the church would be built, but he will have to face his own weaknesses before long. Peter will enthusiastically promise his undying loyalty to Jesus on the Mount of Olives, “even if everyone else falls away.” Yet a few hours later, he will deny knowing Jesus three times. After the resurrection, John’s gospel tells us, Jesus, asked Peter three times whether he, Peter, loved him. Peter got upset. He was probably angry with himself, and wanted to forget about his failure, but that didn’t make the issue go away; he needed forgiveness. Jesus’s words were a reminder of his three-fold failure. They were also a three-fold offer of forgiveness, and an assurance that he was restored to his place of responsibility for the community: “feed my sheep.” He was getting a second chance.

How do we cultivate a practice of forgiveness? This is a vitally important task in our families and workplaces, and also in our communities, our nation, and our world.