

Homily, September 17, 2017

Sometimes we say or do something we know we shouldn't. We may make life more difficult for another person. We may hurt them. We may act stupidly or insensitively. And when someone reacts with anger, the most powerfully disarming thing we may do is to say: "I'm sorry." That is, if we express our apology with sincerity and humility and a real sense that we have erred.

Perhaps the only thing more powerful is when the person wronged says with similar sincerity and humility: "I forgive you." (and without adding all the detail about the impact of the error, the ways to avoid it, and all the reasons you should never do it again) A time for correction may be needed, but perhaps at another time.

Today's scriptures speak of the need for forgiveness. And they remind us of how easy it is to not forgive.

In the Gospel, Peter, the emerging leader of the apostles, believed he was generous in suggesting seven chances to do wrong and be forgiven. Jesus responded by saying essentially that the willingness to forgive should be unlimited.

Jesus used a parable to further teach about forgiveness. He spoke of a Master (representing God the Father) who forgave an enormous, almost unimaginable, debt out of love and compassion. But the servant (representing one of God's people) when given the opportunity to imitate that forgiveness in a relatively small matter he didn't. As a result, the Master took back the forgiveness.

The first reading from the centuries immediately preceding the coming of Jesus, calls for forgiveness of one's fellow human beings. It notes that the sinner is inclined to tightly hug wrath and anger. Perhaps each of us can think of an occasion when we felt so wronged that we didn't want to let go of the experience of our anger. The passage warns that the refusal to forgive creates a barrier to the forgiveness of God, who loves us greatly but will be our final judge.

The Gospel parable teaches us that God's forgiveness is immense and our opportunities to imitate that forgiveness are lighter but they are essential to truly accepting God's forgiveness.

Forgiveness is at the heart of our relationship with God in Jesus Christ. We believe that our sins separate us from God. Our Creator has given us life on this earth and the opportunity for eternity in heaven. He has revealed to us the good things that lead to happiness and warned about the things that lead to self-destruction. Nevertheless, we make choices that go against God's revelation and His will for our happiness. We act as if we think we know better,

or at we act without really thinking. So in real justice, God could honor our choices and let us proceed to eternal destruction. Instead He sent His Son to redeem us, to show that He does not want to punish us, He wants us to acknowledge our failure and seek forgiveness. We can truly live, because God has forgiven us and change our lives.

The forgiveness of the Father, to us, is dependent on our humble acknowledgement that we do sin. We do need forgiveness. The willingness to be forgiven by God opens our hearts to the transforming power of His love. When we don't seek His forgiveness, or worse don't think we need it, we close ourselves off from His love.

An important witness to an authentic embrace of our relationship with God is found in how we treat our brothers and sisters. An important fruit of our relationship with God is found in our acts and attitude of forgiveness and forbearance. When we fail to forgive, we are in some small way declaring a certain independence from God. We thus block the forgiveness we need from Him, a forgiveness He offers and would like us to receive.

A lot of our failure to forgive is of a venial nature. The particular incidents are not grave. But as with all venial sin, they wear us down.

So much of our weakness in forgiving is found in our angry reactions to all those stupid, insensitive and even mean things that other people do. I think sometimes we are stuck thinking that our reaction of anger is the most powerful thing we can do. It is usually just the easiest. Anger is often the matter people bring to confession, and I offer some practical reminders. Often that is with the less serious issues of anger are in regard to co-workers, spouses, children, parents and even strangers. They just can do the most aggravating things. In confession I will sometimes ask: "And how long have they been doing this?" If it is someone they have known a long time, I will be told a number of years. I will then ask them if they think the person will change. Often enough they will chuckle when they reply: "No, Father." I think it is fair to say that we can defuse anger by a kind of "pre-forgiveness," prayerfully acknowledging the people and circumstances that will incite our anger and remind ourselves they are going to happen anyway. We then ask the Lord to help us simply let them go even before they pierce our emotional surface.

To err is human; to forgive is divine. In each opportunity to have a forgiving attitude or action, we first remind ourselves that we are human and therefore err. We then go on to imitate, albeit in the most simple of ways, the Divine One, our heavenly Father, Jesus and the

Holy Spirit. And in so doing we grow in our reflection of
and share in the divine.