**Homily for the Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A**

**September 13, 2020**

**St. Bavo Parish**

**Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.**

*First Reading: Sirach 27:30-28:7 (Forgive your neighbor’s injustice, and your sins will be forgiven.)*

*Responsory: Psalm 103 (The Lord is kind and merciful, slow to anger, and rich in compassion.)*

*Second Reading: Romans 14:7-9 (Whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s.)*

*Gospel: Matthew 18:21-35 (How many times must I forgive my brother?)*

The question that Peter poses to Jesus seems quite reasonable: “If my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive?” Notice that Peter is not trying to avoid the obligation to forgive. He *assumes* that he must forgive other people’s offenses. After all, Jesus has made it abundantly clear that mercy and compassion are an integral part of Christian discipleship. He has preached that message consistently and demonstrated it by his own personal outreach to sinners. Peter has learned that lesson, but he assumes that there must be a *limit* to one’s obligation to forgive. Surely, Jesus can’t expect us to just let people walk all over us. If our brother persists, sinning against us over and over again, asking for mercy but showing no sign of real conversion, there must be a point at which we can say with a clear conscience, “Enough is enough.” Right? Peter suggests that *seven times* might be a reasonable limit. That should give the sinner ample opportunity to repent and reform. In fact, seven times might strike many of us as rather generous.

Jesus’ response to that suggestion must have come as quite a shock to Peter and all the other disciples: “I say to you, not *seven* times, but *seventy-seven* times.” In other words, there is no limit. We have to keep on forgiving *indefinitely*. That may seem like an extreme position. Actually, let’s be honest, it *is* extreme. But, on the other hand, Jesus’ parable about the two servants and their forgiving Master reveals why that demand for limitless mercy is also quite *reasonable*. In fact, when seen from the proper perspective, *withholding* our forgiveness from a fellow sinner seems like the height of arrogance and ingratitude.

The *Master*, of course, is the key to the whole parable. Remove him from the picture, and that middle scene, where one servant cannot pay back the debt that he owes to his fellow servant, looks totally different. Under Jewish law, the creditor’s actions – demanding repayment of his loan and throwing the debtor into prison when he can’t pay – would have been perfectly legal and morally justified. That’s what happened to delinquent debtors in Jewish society. Either they paid what they owed, or they went to prison until their families could come up with the money.

The Master’s actions in the first scene completely change the moral calculus of that later scene involving just the two servants. What would have otherwise seemed totally justified by societal norms becomes completely outrageous in light of what the Master has done. The very same servant who demands repayment of his *small* loan has just received forgiveness of a *much larger debt*. When he fell to his knees and said to his Master, “Be patient with me, and I will pay you back,” the Master was moved with compassion. Realizing that the servant could never pay him back in full, the Master canceled the entire debt. You would think that the servant who has received such great mercy would be in a rather forgiving mood when he comes across his fellow servant, who owes him a much smaller debt. Now that he finds himself in the role of the *creditor*, rather than the *debtor*, we expect him to imitate his Master’s kindness. But, no. When his fellow servant falls to *his* knees and begs for mercy in the *exact same words* that the first servant had spoken to their Master only moments earlier, he is *not* moved with compassion. Apparently, he sees *no connection* between the two episodes. All he sees is a debtor who owes him money and can’t pay it back.

That sort of tunnel vision is what gets *us* into trouble when a brother or sister sins against us. Our tendency is to look at the other person’s sin in isolation: “That person owes me a debt, *period*.” Fine, but what about our *own* debts? We can cling to our righteous indignation as long as we ignore our own history of sin. But, any justification for our anger and lack of compassion falls apart very quickly as soon as we recall the great multitude of sins that God has forgiven us. Like the first servant in the parable, we have come before our Master with heavy burdens of sin. Recognizing that we had no way to repay God for our failures, we have simply thrown ourselves at the Lord’s feet and asked for mercy. And, the Lord has been moved with compassion *every time*. Every single time that we have entered the confessional with true repentance in our heart, we have returned home with our sins forgiven and our burdens lifted. Moreover, we are *absolutely certain* that there will never come a time when the Lord will say to us, “Enough is enough.” No confessor is ever going to say, “I’m sorry, but you’ve confessed that same sin too many times. You’re past your limit. God will not forgive you anymore.” If that were to happen, we would be utterly lost, crushed by the weight of our sin.

God’s limitless mercy, which we have received in the past and count on receiving in the future, must be the backdrop for all of our encounters with our fellow servants and fellow sinners. Otherwise, we might find ourselves meeting the same end as the merciless servant in the parable. None of us wants to stand before the Lord on Judgment Day and hear him ask us accusingly, “Should you not have had pity on your fellow servant, as I had pity on you?” Rather, we should heed the words of Sirach, which we heard in the First Reading today: “Think of the commandments, hate *not* your neighbor; remember the Most High’s covenant, and *overlook faults*.”

Overlooking other people’s faults can be difficult, especially when they have injured us by their sin. But, Jesus is not asking us to “forgive and *forget*,” to pretend that we were never hurt by those who have sinned against us. Rather, he’s imploring us to “forgive and *remember*.” We remember the debt of sin that others owe us, but we weigh that against the *much larger debt* of sin that God has forgiven us in the past. Filled with gratitude for the Lord’s boundless mercy toward us, we allow ourselves to be moved with compassion for our fellow sinners, and we offer them just a *tiny fraction* of the forgiveness that we have received. Now, doesn’t that seem like a reasonable thing to do?