

Homily for the 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time, A, 9/13/2020

Once again our theme this Sunday is forgiveness. This is a concept many of us have a hard time with. But remember that if we do not forgive others we may turn into bitter people. Please God -- help us not to fall into the trap of failing to forgive.

One of my friends, Sgt. Mike Hanson, now deceased, was a NY policeman of the Emergency Service Unit (E-1). He was off duty on 9/11 but as soon as he heard of the falling of the Twin Towers he responded. And for the next 9 months his assignment was to join his team searching the rubble of the Twin Towers for any victims or body parts until the last beam was removed. Because of this work he, himself, suffered a rare neuro-toxic disease from heavy-metals that shortened his life substantially. In a conversation he had with me just before he died he told me he was in no way a bitter man but was simply grateful to God that he was able to use his talents and skills to help as many victims of 9/11 as he could. Let me say that he has always been a great example to his family and community of what Jesus asks us in regards to living our faith and forgiving others.

With this in mind -- let us look at the scriptures chosen for this Sunday. In our Gospel Peter, feeling very generous, asks Jesus how often he should forgive, suggesting seven times. Jesus's answer to him is not seven times, but seventy-seven times or simply always. To illustrate this Jesus gives the following parable: a king forgives his servant an enormous debt. But that same servant refuses to forgive his fellow servant for a very minor debt. When the king finds this out he is furious with him and has him severely punished. Jesus ends by saying: *"So will my heavenly Father do to you unless each of you forgives your brother or sister from your heart."*

In the parable, the king is God and the debts are absurd – the first amount of debt is in the millions and the second amount is just a few dollars. Jesus tells this parable to point out how forgiving God is of our many sins and how paltry we are with our own attempts at forgiveness. In fact, our reaction may be not to forgive but to get even or worse still -- to harbor a grudge. How often do we see friends or even brothers or sisters who over some minor fault – fail to speak to each other for months, if not years? How silly is that!

Yes, we all know the teaching of Jesus on forgiveness. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus tells us: *“to turn the other cheek and to forgive our enemies and even to love them!”* But we find this so hard. Don't we! We may be still stuck in that Old Testament mentality of *“an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”* or even cry for revenge. We also know that when we pray the Lord's Prayer, we pray to God *“to forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”* Somehow we forget this or ignore the words following this prayer: *“If you forgive others their transgressions, your heavenly Father will forgive you, yours, but if you do not forgive others, neither will your heavenly Father forgive you, yours.”*

To conclude! How do we forgive? Do we do so totally? And from the heart? And how often do we do this? Can we do it 77 times or always? Finally, can we be like Sgt. Mike Hanson who did this after 9/11? I hope so!

Nobody says this better than St. Francis of Assisi in his beautiful peace prayer: ***Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.***