

All of our Scripture readings today focus on forgiveness. St. Paul reminds us that through the death and resurrection of Jesus on the cross the weight of Original Sin, a debt by our own initiative we could never repay has been cancelled. Through the cross we have been reconciled by God's mercy. We experience the continued gift of divine mercy each time we pray here at Mass and in our personal prayer: "forgives us our trespasses" and each time we confess our sins in the Sacrament of Penance. Simultaneously, as today's first reading from Sirach and Jesus' words in response to Peter's question in the Gospel remind us, we who have been, and continue to be, recipients of God's forgiveness and mercy are, in turn, called to "forgive those who trespass against us." This is a central focus of Jesus' ministry and preaching and an anchor of living as his disciple. Unfortunately, when it comes to the offenses we experience in relationship with others, too often, like the debtor in the Gospel parable, we forget the divine mercy we have received and choose to remember and hold on to every insult, every snub, every shortcoming, when it comes to being hurt or aggravated by others.

Forgiving once, okay, but seven times, Peter suggests, is beyond the pale. Yet Jesus says to him, "I say to you, not seven times but seventy-seven times." In other words, forgive constantly, relentlessly, without calculation just like God. Your whole life must become an act of forgiveness, as the master of the servant in the parable states: "I forgave you your entire debt because you asked me to. Should you not have had pity on your fellow servant, as I had pity on you?" (Mt. 18:19). The man in the parable who had been forgiven much, should have, at the very least, shown forgiveness to the one who owed him so much less than he himself had asked for and without qualification, received. One commentator suggests that the way to practicing the largesse of divine forgiveness is through the practice of "seven times seven" in the rubbings up against each other that are part of daily life. Perhaps the following story can help us.

A monk in a monastery was assigned a place in choir for community prayer next to an older monk. Each day, without fail, the other monk in the choir stall next to the monk would wait until the community had started its prayer together to clear his nose. Whether this was on purpose or due to allergies, the other monk did not know. But after a while it was driving him crazy. Why couldn't the other monk clear his sinuses on the way into the abbey church? Why did he always wait until this moment to clear his nose? Finally, the monk had had enough. He gently, but firmly, confronted his brother monk about his habit. The other monk, remorseful, asked for forgiveness, which the offended monk gave. A week later, he was again back to clearing his nose at the same time. Again, when reminded of his annoying habit, he asked for an received forgiveness. But, soon enough, he was back to his old habit. The other monk, finally in frustration, brought angst into his personal prayer. At some point he came to realization that he was being called to remember his own need for forgiveness; his own seeking God's forgiveness; only to recall succumbing again and again to the same sins in his own life and his repeated pleas for forgiveness. Through his fellow monk God was teaching him the lesson of divine forgiveness which unceasingly "overlooks faults". Pope Francis consistently proclaims that no one can be excluded from God's mercy.

Here is the heart of the matter: whatever anyone owes us (in strict justice) is infinitely less than what God has graciously given to us. The divine forgiveness we have received is infinitely greater than any forgiveness we might be called upon to offer, a truth the monk in the monastery learned from his experience with his fellow monk.

Becoming an instrument of God's life, grace, forgiveness, and peace is what it is all about. May each of us allow to flow through us what has been poured into us. Then when we pray "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us" we will not be just uttering pious sentiments, but in fact proclaiming the truth of God's on-going mercy to us and our commitment to be agents of that same mercy for one another.

Fr Jim Secora