

Dcn. Jerry's Homily for September 17, 2023. 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Peter asks a simple question. "Lord, if my brother sins against me how often must I forgive? How many times should I forgive him, as many as seven times?" Peter uses the word "sin"; he does not use the word annoy or bother or irritate. This is not a situation where Andrew and Peter were walking with the other disciples and Andrew kept invading Peter's space the way kids will do in the backseat of the car. If Peter's brother sinned against him then it was something serious; he cheated or beat him or one of the other serious offenses that cause division in a family or even to disown or repudiate another. Give Peter his due. He knows Jesus is teaching mercy and not an eye for an eye. But after all, how often do I have to put up with this scoundrel? My brother is an embarrassment. I was vulnerable and he took advantage of me. I look weak and foolish. Seven is a perfect number in Hebrew numerology so to forgive seven times is significant.

It is interesting how Peter is always first among the Apostles. He usually asks the human question which may seem foolish in hindsight, but it gives Jesus an opportunity as He explains God's ways not only to the Apostles, but also to us. Somehow it seems odd that Peter is the one who asks how often he should forgive. Peter is the one who attempts to talk Jesus out of going to Jerusalem and Jesus has to say, "Get behind me Satan." Peter gets out of the boat and then sinks because of lacking faith, he cries out, "Lord save me." And at the Last Supper when Peter is speaking boastfully, Jesus warns him that he will deny Him three times before morning has broken. Peter, more foolhardy than brave, assures the Lord that he will never deny Him. A few hours later, Peter weeps bitterly because he knows that he has miserably failed the Lord. Near the beginning of Christ's public ministry, Peter says, "Get away from me for I am a sinful man." And yet it is this sinful man who would fail time and again who is asking, "How often do I need to be merciful?"

My maternal grandfather's favorite saying was "Judge not lest ye be judged." That would be a good lesson for each of us. Forgiveness is a divine virtue and not easy for many of us. A sense of hurt, a desire to be right, a sense of betrayal, even fear – there are many emotions and reasons that make it difficult to forgive. Sometimes even in serious family fights, in which different parties remember events differently, it may be better to let time pass and then reconcile. A relationship is more important than an apology. In other situations, for instance when there is an abusive spouse or someone suffering addiction, is my attempting to forgive an act of mercy or an act that enables further bad acts? Pray for the right answer.

There are no easy answers. Pray for humility and to see your sinner with God's eyes. Jesus patiently teaches Peter and the other Apostles along with all of us. When Peter asked this exasperating question, Jesus knew not only all the times that Peter would fail but also the times that he would succeed. After all there are two principal reasons we forgive someone. If we do not forgive, we risk becoming bitter and withdrawn. In a way the person who wronged us, perhaps intentionally, succeeds. We are wounded and become withdrawn. The second reason to forgive and to show mercy is that not only do we come closer to Christ, but we also give the sinner the opportunity to do the same.

Peter would stumble his way through Christ's public ministry. He took two steps forward and one back. He might weep tears of remorse when he sinned, but he would also get up and try again. Do you think that when he was weeping that maybe he finally got it? He

finally understood the gift of mercy? To the extent we see Peter later in the Gospels and then after Pentecost, he is a different man – humble but courageous and focused on one thing, bringing people to Christ.

Jesus has an advantage over us when He shows mercy; He knows the outcome; He knows that eventually Peter would choose the right path. But Jesus treats all of us with mercy and I suspect some of us may go down the wrong path later. But the path Peter chose, the path we choose and the path that those who sin choose, are really a series of small steps each made with free will. Some steps are good and some are bad.

If we humbly accept the mercy of unearned forgiveness, if we go forward to joyfully accept mercy to forgive as we wish to be forgiven, if we forgive others in love and from the bottom of our heart, then the journey ahead of us will lead to God's kingdom.

~Dcn. Jerry