

Rev. Toan Do
Sirach 27:33-28:9
Romans 14:7-9
Matthew 18:21-35

24TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
Epiphany Catholic Church
Louisville, KY, USA
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Is there any sin or is there any debt that we owe that cannot be forgiven? Jesus in his parable, or as in the gospel today for Matthew seems to present, in my understanding, two images. One is "the kingdom of heaven is likened;" we should text that more properly. "Is likened" is not "exactly the same." The kingdom of heaven is likened to a king who wanted to settle his accounts with his servants. And that already implies to us that in a way, there's certain elements in the kingdom of this world, or in this world, ruler and king are not exactly like God. Why? Because we understand, and we believe, that the God of Jesus and the God of the Jewish people and now our God would have not had the same exact dealing with servants and sinners the way the kings and the rulers of this world would.

First, his master orders the servant who could not pay back to be sold, along with his wife, his children and all of his property. In a sense, the God of the Jewish people would not have done so. But the king of this world, the ruler of this world, human beings in general, would do that. Then Jesus goes one step further, giving credit to this king and the ruler of this world out of compassion and mercy, this king forgave the servant his entire debt, his entire sin, owed to the king. But because of the wickedness of the servant, of this human being, at the end, the king summoned him in again and asked him to pay back all that he wanted to forgive, and send him to the torturer until he paid his debt. The image, or at least the amount of debt or sin, the gravity of the sin here implies to us at least to tell us that there's no way, no way in this world the servant or any human being could pay back the sin and the debt that we owe to God, to this king as a human being.

And because of that, Jesus wants us to go one step further. You recall, as I remember, this is my third week in this 11:30 mass here, but four weeks ago you recall, and now I want to bring you back when Peter confessed to Jesus being the Christ and the Son of God. And because of that confession, Jesus praised Peter with the title, the rock upon which the foundation Jesus would build his church. The following weekend, which is three weeks ago, we heard that the same Peter, represented by the same rock upon which Jesus' church was built, became Satan,

the stumbling block to the path onto which Jesus would accomplish his mission to return to God. Last weekend, we began to hear, as I mentioned, that Jesus again tells his disciples a different story, something about fraternal corrections, that Peter, who represents the church, must learn to reconcile with his brothers and sisters. This weekend, not only just fraternal correction, Peter, who represents the church, the church must learn to forgive without counting the times of forgiveness and how hard and difficult it is.

And Peter, once again, thought that forgiving seven times is generous. Jesus goes beyond, much beyond that, to say that 70 times seven; in a sense, one should not even multiply, but think of that as forgiveness should have no limits. Every time we forgive, we should not count the times that we forgive. We must learn to forgive one another.

Several years ago, when I was still a pastor in another parish, I encountered this family who had five children. They were all much older than me. I knew about two or three and the other two I never met. There were three brothers and two sisters. And the oldest brother in the family who, because of his age, being the firstborn, had very little education, finished high school. But he was always resilient, diligent in his work, his personality, although he was never rich; but he worked so hard all his life that he could secure a decent living and retirement. Whereas the other two brothers, one who was much better, later on learned to be a professor in one of the universities. And a third one who fell away was also very talented, but never learned to live decently.

Those are the things in family that we experience at other times. The worst things they shared with me, this oldest brother shared with me, because of internal family conflicts early on in their lives, he and one of the other siblings had lost contact, had never spoken to each other, had never reached out for almost four decades. Now in his 80s, knowing that something must be done, he asked me, and he shared, that he had tried to reach out to this brother many times, even asking all family members, friends through Facebook and social media. And, over the years, they could never find what happened to this sibling, to this brother. And, out of the desire, and in a sense, a sense of guilt in there, he confined to say that he had tried all that he could.

This family situation brings me back to this gospel reading today. We know that in the same gospel, several chapters earlier in Matthew 12, verse 31, when Jesus was asked whether there were any sins that could not be forgiven, if there was any debt that one owes that could not be forgiven, Jesus tells his disciple in 12:31, "There is no sin that cannot be forgiven except the sin against the Holy Spirit." What Jesus

really meant in that context of the one sin that cannot be forgiven is the sin against the Holy Spirit, the sin in which one of us or anyone who denies God's forgiveness, who denies the existence of God. Even Jesus goes on to the next verse in Matthew 12:32 to say that even sins against the Son of Man, namely the sins against Jesus, can be forgiven. Only sins against the Holy Spirit, against the existence of God, cannot be forgiven. If we try to interpret that broadly into this context, there is no sin in this world that cannot be forgiven. There is no debt in this world that we owe to one another that cannot be forgiven.

But in today's gospel, Jesus seemed to set that aside as he makes the kingdom of heaven is likened to a king, namely in his mind, the king and ruler of this world. Even out of compassion and mercy, there's still weakness there because of this wicked servant, that same king, that same ruler of this world, summoned that wicked servant back and sent him to prison, sent him to torturers until he should pay back all that he owed to this king. God and his forgiveness, by contrast, has no limits. We can only not forgive ourselves even in our human weakness, we may fail to forgive ourselves and one another. God will always extend his hands and his mind and his heart to embrace us.

In today's second reading from Paul's letter to the Romans, Paul reminded the Romans then and us today, whether we die or live, we are God's. We belong to God. So even if death in this world can cause us life here on earth, God will bring us back to eternity. As of the last time when I spoke with this brother in the story I shared, I said that you have tried your best having lost contact with your sibling, your brother; your heart has reached out. As Jesus says today, if you forgive your brother or sister from your heart, your heart has done the work. Let God take care of the situation. The only thing, I believe, that can hold on to our hearts and our minds is the injury, the wounds that we cannot let ourselves be healed of. Let us ask God to give us not only courage, but grace to forgive ourselves and to forgive one another.