

Deacon Randy Perkins
Sirach 27:33-28:9
Romans 14:7-9
Matthew 18:21-35

24TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
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At a women's bible study, one of the attendees agreed to share her faith story. She explained she'd had a horrible falling out with her uncle years ago and she'd harbored anger and hate toward him for years, so much that she told her mother if he were to die, she wouldn't even attend his funeral! But then, she shared, she found God and discovered church. Thanks to her new faith, she said, "I've finally forgiven him, and now I'd gladly attend his funeral any time!"

Saying "I forgive you" can be difficult enough on its own, but *meaning* it when we say it can be even more difficult! Our human instinct is biased toward self-protection and self-preservation; and forgiveness, real forgiveness, demands vulnerability. So it makes sense that we often struggle with letting go of past hurts and opening ourselves to reconciliation.

But for the Christian, forgiveness is not an optional act. As Sirach stated in our first reading, our very salvation is conditioned on our willingness to forgive others. "Forgive your neighbor's injustice; *then* when you pray, your own sins will be forgiven. . . . Could anyone refuse mercy to another . . . [and then] seek pardon for his own sins?"

Jesus offers that same teaching in the Parable of the Ungrateful Servant. The whole point of that parable is to help us understand that if we don't forgive others, God won't forgive us. At the end of the parable, the ungrateful servant was handed over to the torturers until he paid back his entire debt; and Jesus told his disciples, "So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives your brother...."

But there's more! Jesus didn't just leave it at "Forgive your brother." He said, "So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives your brother *from your heart*."

From your heart. What does that look like? I think it's fair to say that the niece in the opening joke may have claimed to have forgiven her uncle, but her actions and words question whether she had forgiven him "from her heart."

If we want to know what true forgiveness, forgiveness from the heart, looks like, we need to look no further than Jesus himself, who while hanging on the cross didn't cry out for justice but instead cried out, "Forgive them, for they know not what they do."

We need look no further than Jesus' parable of the loving father who waited longingly for his hurtful prodigal son to return home, and then welcomed him home, *unconditionally*.

We need look no further than the same kind of forgiveness we seek from others when we ask for their forgiveness. Pope John Paul II explained it this way: "All human beings cherish the hope of being able to start all over again and not remain forever shut up in their own mistakes and guilt. They all want to raise their eyes to the future and to discover new possibilities of trust and commitment.... Why not therefore do towards others what we want them to do towards us?"

Why not do towards others what we ask God to do toward us every time we seek God's forgiveness or celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation?

That is what forgiveness from the heart looks like.

Yesterday, we honored the 25th anniversary of the most horrific attack on our country in all of our history. An act of pure evil. Three thousand people murdered. How do you ever forgive the unforgiveable? How do you forgive "from the heart"?

One of the people killed that day was Greg Rodriguez. He was working in the World Trade Center that morning. After the first plane struck, he managed to call home and leave a message saying that there had been a terrible accident, but that he was all right. His mother, Phyllis, heard that message while watching television.

And then she watched the second plane hit. For hours she held onto hope. Maybe Greg had gotten out. Maybe he was somewhere in the chaos. Maybe the phone lines were simply overwhelmed. But Greg never came home.

Imagine her overwhelming grief, her justifiable anger. About a year after 9/11, Phyllis came face to face with another mother, Aicha el-Wafi. Aicha is the mother of Zacarias Moussaoui, one of the co-conspirators behind the attacks.

A mother whose son had been murdered, coming face-to-face with a mother whose son faced the death penalty for planning the murder. Can you imagine the pain, the grief, the mistrust that must have filled that space!

But, as Phyllis would later explain, when Aicha walked into the room, something happened. The two women's eyes met. They walked toward each other. And they embraced. And they cried. And they discovered that they were very much alike, two mothers holding each other and crying over their sons. Two mothers with broken hearts.

Phyllis said that meeting changed the direction of her life. She began to understand that true forgiveness demands that we close the distance between ourselves and the person who hurt us. She explained that only when she looked into Aicha's face could she see her as anything but an enemy. And that encounter, she said, was the beginning of forgiveness "from the heart." Forgiveness that, by necessity, included letting go of the anger and bitterness that filled her heart.

Some like to mischaracterize forgiveness from the heart as naiveite or weakness; as surrender or a failure to exact justice; but just four months after the 9/11 attacks, Pope John Paul II rejected that idea: "Forgiveness may seem like weakness, but it demands great spiritual strength and moral courage.... It may seem in some way to diminish us, but in fact it leads us to a fuller and richer humanity, more radiant with the splendor of the Creator."

It's easy to say, "I forgive you, but I want you to suffer." It's easy to say, "I forgive you, but every time I see you, I'm going to remember what you did." It's easy to say, "I forgive you, but I have no use for you." There's nothing courageous or victorious about that.

But visualize again that initial meeting between those two mothers. There was nothing weak about their embrace. Those were not two naïve women engaging in an act of surrender. Quite the opposite, they were real-life models of strength and courage, and of the forgiveness from the heart that Jesus demands of us.

Who in your life needs forgiveness? Where is there distance in your life that needs to be closed? What is the relationship that needs to be reconciled? Let's lean

on God to give us the courage to do what we are obligated to do, and let's do it! Let's pray that God will give us the same courage as Phyllis and Aicha, to take that step, to offer that embrace. Perhaps, we might also discover that the person standing on the other side of our anger is just another broken human being with a broken heart, too.