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Peter asked,
“Lord,
how often
must I forgive?
As many as
seven times?”

MATTHEW 18:21

GOD’S MERCY

In many of our relationships with others—friends, spouse, neighbors, or co-workers—often the most difficult times come when someone damages the relationship. There are moments when only apology and forgiveness can lead to healing. In this week’s readings, we are reminded how our connection with God is woven into our relationships with others. God is the source of all mercy, and all of us stand in need of forgiveness. As we are able to accept the mercy of God deep within our hearts, we become empowered to show mercy to others. When things go badly in our relationships, we can remember that God is present at the center of these difficult moments. God is offering grace to ask forgiveness, to receive apology, and to accept the forgiveness extended to us.

FORGIVEN AND FORGIVING

In today’s Gospel, Jesus calls his followers to forgive “seventy-seven” times. In other words, stop keeping track when forgiving others. But when we are hurt, this is really hard to do. In fact, to protect ourselves from further hurt, we might be inclined to do the opposite, and lash out. Jesus teaches the futility of this approach.

Jesus’ parable of the unforgiving servant reminds us that in the course of our lives we have harmed others, and so distanced ourselves from God. We have also been harmed by others. Like the servant, we sometimes owe a debt, and sometimes others owe a debt to us. Here we are invited to stop the cycle of pain with the grace of mercy. We are called to imitate our God, who forgives wholeheartedly.

PROTECTING THE VULNERABLE

It is also tempting to view this teaching on forgiveness in isolation. This would suggest that the burden is placed entirely upon the offended person to go on forgiving, without mentioning any accountability on the part of the offending person. This interpretation can often be dangerous. The call to forgive should never be used as a cover for bullying or for oppressive relationships of any kind.

It is helpful to consider all of chapter 18 in Matthew’s Gospel, which teaches about forgiveness and reconciliation, and the exercise of authority in the Christian community. Last week’s Gospel (Matthew 18:15–18) provides guidance on how Christians can call to accountability someone who has hurt others, to protect the weak, and to seek reconciliation as a community. The parable we hear today reminds us that, like the master who protected the second servant from the cruelty of the unforgiving servant, God seeks to guard the most vulnerable from harm.

The Gospel of Matthew presented an alternative to the violence-based order of his day. Matthew described Jesus’ vision of community, in which power is used at the service of all and the vulnerable are protected and cherished.

TODAY’S READINGS

Sirach 27:30 — 28:7
Psalm 103:1–4, 9–12
Romans 14:7–9
Matthew 18:21–35

TWENTY-
FOURTH
SUNDAY
IN
ORDINARY
TIME
SEPTEMBER
13
2020