

FORGIVENESS SUNDAY 2017

On the last Sunday before the Lenten Fast the gospel reading calls our attention, first and foremost, to forgiveness. Just as last week's gospel stressed the absolute necessity of love for neighbor through charitable works, so today's gospel makes the same case for forgiveness.

Let's remember that the Lenten exercises are not ends in and of themselves but were designed by experts in the Christian life with one end in mind; the deepening of our love for God and our love for neighbor. The exercises of fasting and prayer have as their particular object the development of love for God, in Christ. The exercises of charity and forgiveness are there to help us strengthen love for neighbor.

Fasting loosens the hold that the physical appetites tend to have over our lives and makes prayer easier. Charity loosens the hold that possessions have over us and makes forgiveness easier. Father Thomas Hopko tells us that "love between sinners is essentially expressed in forgiveness." This is because God's love for sinners (and that's all people) is also essentially expressed through forgiveness. God loves us even in our sins. He does not wait to love us until we are good. He refuses to not love us and so he forgives us time and time again. The dictionary defines forgiveness as "giving up resentment." This is exactly what God does. He refuses to let our sins darken his countenance towards us.

As Christians we are called upon to imitate God in Christ. We must learn to love one another the way he loves us. St. Paul echoes this calling when he writes in his letter to the Ephesians, and to us; "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children."

Learning to forgive, learning to love people the way God loves us, is really, really hard. Nothing in Christianity is more foreign to our self-centered nature – what the scriptures call, "the Old Man" as opposed to "the New Man" in Christ. Going to church, fasting, giving tithes, and charity are all easy to do compared with

forgiving others the insults and injuries they have caused us. As a confessor I can tell you with absolute certainty that anger, grudge-holding, resentment, bitterness and similar evil pleasures of the heart are the most difficult of all our sins to really repent of. I do not exempt myself from this diagnosis.

Yet, here is Jesus himself in today's gospel telling us, with unavoidable clarity, that if we don't forgive others we will not be forgiven. This does not mean that God is withholding his forgiveness until we forgive. As St. Paul said, he has already forgiven us. I think his meaning is more like; 'if we don't learn to forgive others, God's forgiveness and love will not be able to grow in our hearts.' It might even be lost to us in any practical sense, unable to benefit us in any significant degree. Father Hopko also makes no bones about it; "the Lenten season exists for this purpose: to express the love of God for one another through mutual forgiveness. This is the teaching of Jesus himself."

Inexperienced Christians will sometimes wonder at the approach of Lent. "What do I need to repent of? I'm doing OK.", or, as a Greek lady once told me, "I've been a good girl," and that was true. Experienced Christians know, however, that no matter how carefully they have avoided the grosser sins of human life, mostly what is called sins of commission, it is the sins of omission, failure to do good, that are an indication that our love for God and neighbor is not what it might be. Not one of us can say that we have loved God with our whole heart, mind and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves.

So here are some suggestions, practical tips for practical forgiveness.

First – Make a resolution to avoid criticizing or correcting others. Try not to be offended by people, especially when they are being offensive. Elder Zossima in the Brothers Karamazov expresses this in his deathbed talk to his disciples.

"Brothers, do not be afraid of men's sins. Love man, even in his sins, for that is the semblance of divine love, and is the highest form of love on earth." He goes on to counsel us not to be upset at the sight or existence of people's sins and to always avoid the temptation of trying to correct them by force. Always decide, he says, to combat sin with "humble love." The Lenten prayer of St. Ephram also counsels this: "Grant that I may see my own sins and not judge my brother."

This does not mean relativizing sin or indifference to sinful behavior as long as it doesn't hurt us directly. Sin is sin and is always an occurrence of evil. What we must try not to judge is the person. This, also, is not easy to do and takes deliberate effort to learn. It is, like forgiveness, unnatural to us.

It is also helpful to try and remember that it is much easier to feel merciful towards others when they offend when we are keenly aware of our own need for mercy and forgiveness. It is the person who thinks himself or herself "right" and the other person "wrong" that has the most trouble with forgiveness, or, if willing to forgive, does so with a condescending attitude.

Lastly, avoid argument and disputation with others. Start with avoiding as much as possible the small conflicts that come up, often daily, with family members, co-workers or students and other persons in the parish. That is within our power and ability to work on.

All of us, however, have deeply held resentments and judgments about others and ourselves. These are not within our power to correct or cure because they are largely invisible to us – they have become established in our hearts and the state of our own hearts is our greatest mystery.

Still, if we willingly undergo the rigors and trials of the fast, what we can do, God will do his part. What we can expect is that some of this junk from our hearts is going to get flushed to the surface where we live and we can see it for the evil that it is. Then we must know what to do – forgive, practice repentance including some tangible effort to make amends. Thus bit by bit our hearts will be cleansed and living the Christian life will become more and more a joy to us and to those around us.

May God grant us all such a blessed repentance.