

Sunday Between 11th and 17th September [24]

Matthew 18:21-35

Today's readings are all based around the theme of forgiveness and we all understand the general concept of forgiveness, but most of us struggle to do it. So, this morning, we're going to answer the questions: How do I forgive him? How do I forgive her?

The starting point for pursuing forgiveness is to admit that you've really been hurt. We like to pretend that what he said didn't really bother us or what she did didn't even phase us, but until we are willing to admit that we were hurt by someone, we're not in a place where we can begin to pursue forgiveness.

There are many incidents in life that are not candidates for forgiveness - things like minor disappointments or passing slights. Situations that require forgiveness are ones where the pain inflicted is personal, unfair, and deep. Things like betrayal and brutality (physical or emotional) come to mind. At this point, as we hurt, we are likely to find some hatred in our heart. Hatred, of course, is never a good thing, but we must be careful that we don't try to get rid of it by covering it up. When we find that hate in our heart, that's simply a sign we're going to need to forgive.

Next we must surrender our right to get even. A mother ran into the bedroom when she heard her seven-year-old son scream. She found his two-year-old sister pulling his hair. She gently released the little girl's grip and said comfortingly to the boy, "There, there. She didn't mean it. She doesn't know that hurts." He nodded his acknowledgement, and she left the room. As she started down the hall the little girl screamed. Rushing back in, she asked, "What happened?" The little boy replied, "She knows now."

Few would dispute our right to get even. The rule of the world is 'do unto others as they've done unto you.' When we choose to forgive, though, we choose to lay aside our right to exact our revenge. In the moment of making that decision, we are doing a couple of things: we are leaving ultimate justice and vengeance to God, and we are deliberately choosing for ourselves the path of forgiveness.

This is the first step down a different path. Acknowledging that we have been hurt gets in the right place to begin, but surrendering our right to get even is the first step down the path. Some would argue that choosing such a path is inevitably going to make us weak, we're yielding all our power and are going to end up as a doormat. But there is a power that is unleashed in this decision that cannot come from any other source. It is a power we see time and again in stories of victims of crime forgiving the individuals who perpetrated the crime which in turn caused the perpetrator to drop their defences and show some remorse.

When we have been wronged, we like to caricature our wrongdoer. We emphasize all the bad things about them, we twist anything that looks remotely good, we are quick to impugn their every motive, we see them only and always in one way. The process of forgiveness requires that we begin to look for the real person behind the caricature we've created in our minds. We begin to see that they have not only hurt, they have

been hurt. We begin to see that they are weak, needy, and fallible. We begin to find reasons for our hearts to turn toward mercy instead of malice.

This doesn't mean we grant them victim status and excuse all their wrong - we're forgiving, not excusing. It does mean that we begin to try to treat them as another participant in this messy thing called life. What is our motivation for doing this? As our passage points out, we are doing for them what God did for us. God could have simply seen our sin and said, "I've seen enough, that's all I need to know about them." But God looked beyond our sin and saw something worth loving. And that's what we've been called to do as well.

Finally, and if possible, enjoy the healed relationship. Sometimes the other person can't join you in moving toward reconciliation (for example, in forgiving someone now deceased) and sometimes the other person won't join you (for example, someone who won't acknowledge that they've hurt you). For reconciliation to happen, they must understand the pain that they've caused you and must be sorrowful over it. But when they are, make sure you enjoy the healing and the renewed relationship that can only come through forgiveness.

So not only, as Christians, should we do unto others as we would wish them to do unto us, we also need to remember to do unto others that which God has already done unto us. That is to be merciful and forgiving looking for the good in those we meet and while we need not excuse the sin we must never forget to love the sinner.