

24TH Sunday in Ordinary Time: September 13, 2020

St. Vincent de Paul Church, Baltimore

A Gospel Reflection *Mt. 18:21-19:1 Parable of the Unmerciful Servant*

“If my brother sins against me, how often should I forgive him?” asks Peter of Jesus in today's Gospel reading. Peter makes a guess at the answer to his own question—seven times. You can just picture the look of the earnest pupil on Peter's face, thinking “seven...yeah that seems pretty generous.” And Jesus, as he so often does, shakes his head at Peter, and all of us striving, erring human beings, and tenderly corrects him to forgive “not seven times but seventy-seven”. What strikes me about this Gospel is the message it has regarding guidance, both how we guide others by our words and actions, and how we live up to the example of those who have provided guidance to us.

The parable which follows tells the story of a servant who owes his master a great deal of money. When the debt is called in, he turns on the water works and begs for mercy. The master forgives the debt. Shortly thereafter, the servant meets a man who owes him money. The servant beats the man and has him jailed for failure to pay. This guy is insufferable, right? What excuse is there for having been shown the right way and then acting so darn petty?

And yet, with a moment's reflection and a little humility, I can recall plenty of times when I have been insufferable. We have scripture to guide our actions, but most of us are also blessed to have people in our lives who have shown us the right way. And I for one have not always followed the good examples demonstrated to me, especially when, as with the servant in the parable, I am feeling stressed or insecure.

How often has my impatience caused me to mishandle an interaction with another person, to fail to listen, to speak to hear the sound of my own voice or assert my intelligence, to ignore the needs of another right in front of my eyes? I recently spent a week with my in-laws, and after a few days in someone else's home, I get cranky. My in-laws are chatty; they like background noise; the TV or radio is on when I

would prefer quiet. My children forget how to entertain themselves due to the steady stream of vintage toys pulled from the basement and generally having their every whim catered to. Hosting guests can wear on one's patience also, but my in-laws never show their crankiness; they never respond to my children's frustration or tears with anything but tenderness.

The people who forgive us, and whom we hopefully forgive in turn, "not seven times but seventy-seven" are not passing acquaintances. To be forgiven seventy-seven times, these must be our old friends, our family, our spouses. These people are dear to us, but they also know exactly how to get under our skin; they are the people about whom it is easiest to jump to conclusions without hearing them out, to bemoan "why do you always do that?" I believe this Gospel invites us to recall God's mercy in all our interactions, but especially in these relationships which endure through life's many changes. Any relationship of great length requires both the forgiving and the guiding, the mercy when homage is paid only upon the prospect of suffering or loss, not as often as attention ought to be paid. I am fond of a passage from Thomas Merton's *No Man is an Island*:

"The lives of all the men we meet and know are woven into our own destiny, together with the lives of many we shall never know on earth. But certain ones, very few, are our close friends. Because we have more in common with them, we are able to love them with a special selfless perfection, since we have more to share. They are inseparable from our own destiny, and, therefore, our love for them is especially holy: it is a manifestation of God in our lives."

May our friendships- old, new, and yet to begin- be a manifestation of God's grace in the forgiveness we give and receive and the gentleness we show in guiding or receiving guidance when we can do better.

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