

Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time: Are there limits to forgiveness?

"Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive, as many as seven times?"

"I say to you, not seven times but as many as seventy-seven times."

Don't be concerned with the number 77. Jesus was using this number to say that the amount of times we should forgive is far greater than we could imagine. For the true follower of Christ, there can be no limits to how many times or how much he or she forgives. The Christian realizes the great mercy he or she has received. God sent His Son to become one of us to die for us so that we can have eternal life. The Christian understands that there is no comparison between the forgiveness we have received from God and the forgiveness we must extend to others.

I want to illustrate this with two true stories.

On October 2, 2006, a shooting occurred at the West Nickel Mines School, an Amish one-room schoolhouse in the Old Order Amish community of Nickel Mines, a village in Bart Township, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. The gunman was Charles Carl Roberts, a married man with three children. No one knows why he did what he did. Perhaps he was suffering from some mental or psychological illness. Maybe he just hated the Amish. No one knows why he did what he did. They just know what happened. Roberts pulled his pickup truck up to the school and asked the teacher if she or any of the children had seen something he said he had lost on the road. When they said, "No," he went to his truck and returned with a gun. He ordered the boys to help carry some things into the classroom from his truck and the girls to stand in front of the chalkboard. The girls were ages 6 through 13. He allowed a pregnant woman, three parents with babies and all the boys to exit the building. The older girls realized what was happening and two of them Marian and Barbara Fisher, 13 and 11, asked Roberts if he would just shoot them and let the other girls go. He did shoot them, but he also fired a total of 13 rounds, killing 5 and injuring 3 more before taking his own life.

On the day of the shooting, a grandfather of one of the murdered Amish girls was heard warning some young relatives not to hate the killer, saying, "We must not think evil of this man." Another Amish father noted, "He had a mother and a wife and a soul, and now he's standing before a just God." Jack Meyer, a member of the Brethren community living near the Amish in Lancaster County, explained: "I don't think there's anybody here that wants to do anything but forgive and not only reach out to those who have suffered a loss in that way but to reach out to the family of the man who committed these acts."

A Roberts family spokesman said an Amish neighbor comforted the Roberts

family hours after the shooting and extended forgiveness to them. Amish community members visited and comforted Roberts' widow, parents, and parents-in-law. One Amish man held Roberts' sobbing father in his arms, reportedly for as long as an hour, to comfort him. The Amish also set up a charitable fund for the family of the shooter. About 30 members of the Amish community attended Roberts' funeral, and Marie Roberts, the widow of the killer, was one of the few outsiders invited to the funeral of one of the victims. Marie Roberts wrote an open letter to her Amish neighbors thanking them for their forgiveness, grace, and mercy. She wrote, "Your love for our family has helped to provide the healing we so desperately need. Gifts you've given have touched our hearts in a way no words can describe. Your compassion has reached beyond our family, beyond our community, and is changing our world, and for this we sincerely thank you."

Here's a second story that is less radical in its forgiveness, and describes an incident more typical than a mass murder. About ten years ago Thomas Fleming died at the age of 90 years old. Fleming was a famous historian known for his revolutionary war works. He told this story about his father, Teddy Fleming. Teddy had to go work right out of grade school in order to help provide for their large Catholic family. Now this was over a hundred years ago in Jersey City, New Jersey. Teddy had small delicate hands, perfect for working with watches. One of his friends showed him how to take a watch apart. Teddy studied and studied watches, and soon he was able to get a job in the watch factory owned by a very rich family, the Blaine family. The job would pay one dollar a day. That was big money back in those days, the early 1920's. But, there was one problem. When the workers came to the factory every day, they would be asked, "Catholic or Protestant." If they answered "Catholic," there would be no work for them. For years the young man bit his lip and said, "Protestant." Teddy eventually married and started his own family, but still he had to work at the factory and state each day that he was Protestant.

Then everything changed. In 1929, the stock market crashed. The factory closed, and the Blaine family was left penniless. Meanwhile, Teddy had saved his money and opened his own watch repair store, then another and then another. He married and told his story to his son, Thomas, when the boy was about ten. Soon after that, around 1940, the doorbell rang in the Fleming home. There wearing a tattered cloak and looking emaciated and sick, stood Mr. Blaine. He asked Teddy if he could possibly find some work for him. Listening from the top of the stairs, Thomas wanted his father to turn him away, or at least to ask him: "Are you Catholic or Protestant." Instead, his dad just said that he could benefit from someone doing his book work for all the stores, "Would Mr. Blaine consider this?"

"Certainly," said Mr. Blaine.

"Then, you are hired," said Mr. Fleming.

And without doubt, at the same time the Lord said to Thomas' dad, "And you are forgiven any sins you have committed, Mr. Fleming."

Forgiveness. Forgiveness brings healing. Forgiveness brings the mercy of God. Holding on to anger only brings more suffering, particularly for the person who harbors hate.

The first servant in the Gospel parable for this Sunday owed a huge debt. The translation we used for Mass just says "huge", but the Greek says he owed ten thousand talents. One talent represented fifteen years of daily wages. This man was in deep financial trouble. He'd have to work for 15,000 years to pay this off. This impossible debt was totally dismissed by the king in the parable. That was shocking, and wonderful.

The second servant owed the first a large, but payable debt, 100 denarii. That was the equivalent of 100 days wages. Difficult, but payable. Certainly, not in the same league as the first debt. "A mere fraction" our translation says. 1/54,750th if you want to be exact about it. As you are aware, the first servant refused mercy to the second, and the result is he lost the mercy that had been offered to him by the Master.

It is quite obvious that the parable is contrasting what God has forgiven each of us with those who owe us so much less than we owe God.

This is the ideal for which we strive. It is also one of the hardest tasks of Christianity.

Sometimes people will say, "I can't forgive and forget. I can never forget what he or she did to me or to my family." Forgetting might not be possible. It also might not be the best thing to do. If a man punches you in the face, you should forgive him, but it would be wise to avoid him, or at least wear a hockey mask the next time you see him. Forgetting is not part of the gospel requirement. Forgiveness is.

The focus of our forgiveness should not just be on the person we are forgiving, or even the particular action we are forgiving. **The focus of our forgiveness should primarily be on getting back on track with our own lives.** That is what the Amish people did after the terrible event in Pennsylvania. That is what Thomas Flemings' father did. When you really think about it, all forgiveness ends up with oneself. We need to survive and move on from our hurts, or we will always be bogged down by our anger. **We need to forgive the people who have hurt us--and we all have a thousand battle stories--we need to forgive the people who have hurt us so we can be people who don't hurt others.**

The unmerciful servant ruined a golden opportunity. He could have become a person of kindness and gentleness, reflecting a small portion of the forgiveness he had received. Instead, he held onto his past, his anger at the money still unpaid. His refusal to forgive destroyed him.

Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Those are some of the most healing words in scripture. They are also some of the most difficult words in scripture. We might not want to forgive others, but the pain we have received from others is minor in comparison to the gifts God has given us. Sometimes, people will say, "There but for the Grace of God go I." I actually don't like that statement because it puts me over or better than another person. The statement that appeals to me is, "We all live under the mercy of God."

Today we pray for the grace to forgive and move on with life, just as we thank the Lord for the innumerable times He has forgiven us and has Himself moved on and continued to share His Life with us.