

Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time: God's Overwhelming Mercy

*Should a man nourish anger against his fellows and expect healing from the Lord? Should a man refuse mercy to his fellows, yet seek pardon for his own sins?*

These verses are taken from today's first reading from the *Book of the Sirach*, or, as it is sometimes called, the *Book of Ecclesiasticus*. The message of these verses is brought to life by Jesus in the Gospel reading of the parable of the Unmerciful Servant.

I fear that at times I distance myself from this parable. After all, I wouldn't go around throttling someone. I wouldn't react like the Unmerciful Servant and refuse to forgive a small amount after I've been forgiven a tremendous amount. I wouldn't be like that.

Or would I?

Or would you?

Something within us seems to feel that we have a right to continue in our anger towards someone who has hurt us badly. After all, we didn't create the situation. The other person did. We didn't attack the other person. The other person attacked us. We were the victims, not the aggressors. Our lives would have been significantly different if that other person had not said or done this or that. And so we attempt to justify our anger, our grudge.

To make matters worse, when we reflect on a past upset, we relive it in our minds, and in our bodies. We feel the emotions welling up in us, even though the incident was ten, twenty, or maybe even thirty or forty years ago. Before we realize it, we are there, at the scene of the attack. We once more feel the rage we had and obviously still have.

A few years ago I attended a priest retreat/workshop held by St. Vincent De Paul Seminary, our seminary in Boynton Beach, Florida. I received a great blessing the first night I was there. I could not sleep all night. I kept replaying in my head incidents that happened many years earlier between myself and a priest who at that time was my superior. I was a religious brother at the time preparing to go to theology to become a priest. I thought. Well the superior didn't like me, and the feeling was mutual. Only, he was in a position to make my life extremely difficult. And he did. I moved on to another assignment instead of to theology, something that he probably had a hand in. In time, all fell into place. Five years later, on the eve of my ordination to the priesthood in Columbus, Ohio, there was a knock on my door. That superior had sought me out and wanted to apologize for his part in what had happened between us. I told him I accepted his apology, and it was all water under the bridge. It was big of him to find me to say he was sorry, but I was so wrapped up in my ordination the next day, that I really and truly didn't give it much thought. Many years later, on that

workshop, I was given the grace by being haunted by the memory of those incidents that should have been buried in the past. I couldn't sleep that night. I knew what I had to do. First thing in the morning, I went to the Our Lady's chapel in the seminary, and told the Lord that I thoroughly forgave that other priest. Then I went to confession to seek forgiveness for letting this simmer in my life for all those years.

All of us have our own personal battle stories. Everyone has been wronged by someone, hurt by someone. But no one has the right to harbor a grudge, at least, not if we consider the staggering amount of mercy God has showered upon us.

I have made many mistakes in life. Many were thoughtless acts. But I have also chosen to make mistakes. I have sinned. Yet God has not given up with me. I consider the blessings of my life and I cannot fathom why God is so good to me. I am a priest. I cannot express to you how wonderful it is to be a priest. People need me. I can provide what only another priest could provide: Mass, Eucharist, penance, the sacrament of the sick. I am called upon to be present in the happiest times, baptisms and marriages, and the most difficult times, sickness and death. I can be a vehicle of that which doctors cannot provide, the Peace of the Lord. God is good to his priests.

And I know that God is good to you. Those of you who have children remember what it was like when you held your first child, or each of your new-borns. Husband and wife, you just looked at each other and at the baby with a joy that you could not put into words. One brand new Mom called me up from the hospital and told me that she just had the best baby in the world. I told her, "The baby is only four hours old. Give him time."

God is so good to us, to each of us and to all of us. The Lord also has his battle stories, but he continues to forgive us. Why? Because He loves us. He knows what humans are like. He knows that we all make mistakes. Sometimes we mean well but do wrong. Some times we choose wrong because we are too weak to withstand the pressures around us. We often offend against God's love, but the Lord does not hold a grudge.

Years ago I had a wonderful housekeeper, housemother she preferred to be called, named Lola Brown. She once reminded me that in the history of the world there were only two perfect people to walk the face of the earth. People rejected both of them. One was accused of getting pregnant outside of marriage. She could have been stoned to death. The other was crucified for upsetting the status quo. God knows that the rest of us are far from perfect, but he still loves us.

All of us have received abundant mercy from God because he loves us too much to hold a grudge. One of my favorite books is Sheldon Vanauken's *A Severe Mercy*. This is a love story about two people who found God in each other. Sheldon, or Van, and his wife Davey, tried to construct the perfect marriage. But God was not part of their lives. They constructed what they called a shining barrier, to protect their love. But their love was self-centered. No one would be allowed to penetrate their shining

barrier, including having children. That is how selfish they really were. It was not real love, just a mutual decision to live a life of selfishness. But God eventually penetrated the barrier. They were intellectuals and received a grant to take courses at Oxford University. There they met and became friends with C. S. Lewis. He led them to the Lord. They became believers and learned a new love. Now they found God's love in each other. They bitterly regretted their former way of life, and were very much aware of their need for God's mercy. Davey eventually became sick and passed away, but she died saying words that had become her and Van's way of expressing God's love in their lives. She said, "Under His mercy."

This is how we all live. We live under the mercy of God. He has been so good to all of us. When we consider what we have received, the call to be merciful to others is a tiny reflection of God's great gift to us. Living under His mercy, we must bring his mercy and compassion to others.

Today's readings encourage us to recognize what we have received, to bask in the mercy of God, and to extend this mercy to others.

*Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.*