



There is an old Irish story I like to tell that goes like this: Pat and Mike were brothers. For some reason, and no one could remember exactly why, they had an argument and had not talked to each other for thirty years. At one point, Pat took sick and was in the hospital and it was thought that he was dying. The parish priest, of course named Father O'Malley, wanted the two brothers to reconcile before Pat died. So, he went to Mike and used all his powers of persuasion to convince Mike that he must go see his dying brother and make his peace with him before it was too late. So, a reluctant Mike shows up at the hospital and sees Pat in the bed. He walks over to him, sticks out his hand and mumbles, *I forgive you Pat*. Pat takes the offered hand and says, *Mike, I forgive you*. They nod in agreement and Mike starts to leave the hospital room. However, he stops at the door of the room, turns to Pat, and says, *Pat, if you don't die, this forgiveness doesn't count*. When I tell this story, I often follow it with a description of the disease known as Irish Alzheimer's: You forget everything but your enemies.

I would suggest though, after being a priest for 42 years, that trouble with holding grudges and resentment, and refusing to forgive those who have hurt us or someone we love, is a condition that faces all human beings. In a few minutes, we will say the beautiful prayer that Jesus taught us. *Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us*. I did kind of rough calculation on my calculator and believe I have said those words, *forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us* more than 20,000 times in my life.

In today Gospel, Peter, who wants to try to get some control over this idea of forgiving others asks Jesus if seven times of forgiving another person is enough. I think Peter is playing it kind of safe by setting a high number so that Jesus will be impressed with him. Forgiving a person of something serious once in a person's

life is wonderful. Twice is amazing. Three times is magnificent, four times and you might not be telling the truth. We know what Jesus does with Peter's number of seven. He says you must be willing to forgive another person seventy-seven times! In other words, there is no limit to the call to forgive our brothers and sinners of their sins and faults. As I was thinking about this, I wondered if anybody ever forgave someone seventy-seven times. Then it came to me that if you are the parent of a teenager, you probably have. If you have been successfully married for more than let's say ten years, you may have reached that number. If you are a loyal Jet fan, the number of times you need forgive them time is uncountable.

Forgiveness is a cornerstone of the message of our Lord Jesus Christ. To be a follower of Jesus is to be a man or woman who seeks to be a person who forgives others. In the parable we heard today, Jesus seeks to give us a path to being a forgiving person. He tells us by a simple story that there is no limit to the mercy and forgiveness of God. You cannot put limits on the mercy of God. There is no sin that cannot be forgiven. God does not have a ledger in heaven where he is counting our sins. I like the story of a person who went to Jesus for confession. He said to Jesus, *I know you must be tired of my confessing the same sins. I know you know all the sins I have told you from the past.* Jesus the confessor says, *No, I don't know your past sins. I forgot them already.*

I try hard to avoid serious sins in my life. But I find it very hard over the course of a day, a week, a month to resist gossiping about another or speaking badly of them, of not wasting time, of judging others, of not being attentive in my prayer, and of buying things I do not really need. That is just the short list! I might get through a day without reaching seventy-seven, but I am not too sure about getting through a week. But I trust in the mercy and overwhelming compassionate grace of God and his tender mercies. He is the God who tells us the story of the prodigal child returning home to mercy. On the cross, Jesus turns to his father, and prays that his torturers be forgiven; *Father forgive them for they know not what they do.*

If we can even get a tiny glimpse of the mercy and love that God has for each one of us, perhaps, we would not have such a hard time forgiving others. The old cliché has great wisdom. *To err is human, to forgive is divine.* We are very close to the heart of God when we can forgive another.

I want to stress something about forgiveness. Forgiveness is not reconciliation. I think this is a point many of us miss. Reconciliation takes two parties. For a

reconciliation to happen, both people must come together and forgive one another. This is sort of like the story of Pat and Mike, but with the hope that the results are more lasting. Reconciliations are wonderful moments of healing and grace. We might call them a kind of resurrection; something, perhaps a family relationship, a friendship, that was dead comes back to life. I have heard many stories of families who had a bitter feud, who at the time of a funeral, perhaps of a parent, realize how foolish the fight is and seek to reconcile with one another. *They might say life is short why waste it being angry with one another.* I am so delighted when I witness this reconciliation, but I often wonder why they had to wait twenty years for it to come. All those years lost.

As beautiful as is a reconciliation, it is not always possible for a variety of reasons. Very often, one person will refuse to accept the other's desire to work for healing. They will not return phone calls. Refuse to answer emails. They will not go to a family event if the other is attending. This reality is very sad but also quite common. No matter what we try to do, they want no part of us. In certain cases, it would be unhealthy to seek a reconciliation. It might only lead to more resentment and hurt. It might even put us back into a very destructive relationship. There are times when the person we most need to forgive is dead so reconciliation on this side of the grave cannot occur. Reconciliation is not always possible. Sometimes, as Jesus said, we must shake the dust from our feet and move on.

However, by the amazing grace of God, we can always forgive another person whether they are living or dead. Through prayer and our faith in God, we make the decision to let go, as much as we can, the burden of carrying the anger and hurt in our hearts. We choose not to let the other person live inside of our heads. They do not even have to know we have forgiven them. We pray for them and we pray for the grace to let hurt go. We choose to stop talking about whatever it is that has caused the problem. If we encounter the person, we act civil and not wish them evil. If they were to approach us for a reconciliation, we might be open to it if the approach seems sincere.

One absolute truth I know about forgiveness is that it is not easy. No one talk, no one sermon, no one book may bring it about. We do not obtain the grace of forgiveness like turning on a light switch. Considering how hurt we are, it takes time, prayer, and the love of God in our hearts. Forgiveness begins at the Eucharist. *Lord, forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.*