

# Homily for the 24<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

Sept 12-13, 2020

Readings: Sirach 27:30-28:7; Romans 14:7-9; Matthew 18:21-35

Preacher: Susan K. Roll

Jesus must have enjoyed answering Peter's plaintive question "How many times must I forgive?" with an expansive rhetorical flourish calculated to knock him back on his heels: "Not seven times but seventy-seven times" (other accounts read "Seventy times seven," even better.) One can only imagine what Peter was thinking, and it probably was not charitable.

This brief exchange, and the long developed parable that Jesus spins out from it, clearly set the entire transaction on a cosmic scale. No longer merely a tit-for-tat morality lesson on how to behave toward each other, the parable represents a profound insight into the nature of God's unending mercy and love.

The money amounts are staggering by today's standards: the "huge amount" cited equaled 10,000 talents, and one talent was worth 6,000 denarii. One denarius was a day laborer's wage. It begs the question how a royal servant could end up owing such an unthinkable amount of money to the king. But the story is designed to create a massive shift in our thinking not only about the huge size of the servant's debt contrasted with the paltry debt his colleague owed him, but with the astounding mercy of the king. With God cast as the king figure, the enormity of the forgiven debt illustrates the infinitely generous compassion of a God who feels from the depths of God's very being, literally "womb-compassion."

So far so good. How does this story work when applied to our everyday Christian lives?

It's not a mistake that the text reads "brother:" "...if my brother sins against me..." and "...unless each of you forgives your brother from your heart." The debt owed by the second servant to the first represents a very petty transaction between two men who were social equals. Forgiving the debt would have cost the first servant next to nothing. The Gospel parable appears addressed to men who were

equals in the Jesus movement and (figuratively speaking) brothers in a shared mission.

One of the many concerns voiced by psychologists and counselors during the onset of the pandemic and the need to shelter at home for an indeterminate period of time had to do with the danger of increased domestic abuse. One danger was that in families where a pattern of abuse already existed, prolonged proximity in a small shared space, coupled with frustration at the confinement and fear of the unpredictable course of the pandemic, would exacerbate the abuse. At the same time, physical and behavioral signs of abuse would not be observable by outsiders such as teachers, neighbors, or friends. In Canada a televised public service announcement illustrated a recommended hand gesture that an abused spouse could use during a smartphone call to signal a friend that she was in danger, without using words that could trigger an abuser who was within earshot.

Far too often survivors who belong to churches tell of seeking counseling from a priest or pastor who would try to shame the victim into returning to an abusive home, arguing that she must obey her wedding vows, or offer up her sufferings as did Jesus on the cross, or, of course, forgive the abuser in the face of continuing danger. Often in couples counseling an abuser will go all contrite, plead with the spouse to forgive him and return home, while claiming he will never ever do it again. Soon he does it again.

The Christian injunction to forgive each other does not extend to accepting abuse or attack, or to allowing others to be abused or injured. No one is required to submit to evil. One-on-one abuse, whether rooted in misogyny, racism, or another form of structural hatred, draws strength from a larger ideological drive embedded in a society or a culture. One-on-one forgiveness does not begin to touch the deeper evil.

What may work better would be to cast “forgiveness” in terms of healing for the victim, a precondition of which must be safety and freedom from abuse. This lies entirely within the Christian faith when coupled with the call to evildoers to conversion, *metanoia*, a change of heart that transforms the whole person, inside

and out. A call to conversion on the part of the abuser can be part of restorative justice circles aimed at healing for an individual, a family or a society.

Jesus healed. Jesus protected the weak. And Jesus never hesitated to call out evil. By the power of the Spirit may we do the same.