

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Sept. 17, 2017)
St. Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA
Fr. Michael A. Renninger

I've been angry since Thursday morning.

Frankly, the week had gotten off to a great start. Last Sunday, the Eagles beat the Redskins. God is good.

Wednesday evening, we had a beautiful celebration of the tenth anniversary of the dedication of our church. The whole celebration was exceptional. I went home Wednesday night with a heart full of gratitude.

Then I woke up Thursday morning... and I saw the first text message. Then the emails and phone calls.

No, I'm not mad at Joe Lenich, or Sister Pat, or Sharon Vrtis! I'm not mad about something that happened here, or something that happened in Virginia. My anger stems from people in other places who have made what I consider to be really damaging decisions.

So for the past 72 hours, I've been *very* angry.

I've learned one thing about anger – It's *exhausting*. Staying this angry requires way too much energy.

I know that – at least intellectually. But on Friday evening, after a busy day, I continued to stir up my anger.

What do I do when I get this angry? I write hate mail. And I am very good at it.

I'm pretty good with words. Sometimes, I use words well, preaching or teaching. But when anger gets hold of me, I am good at using words to insult people.

So Friday night, even though I wasn't feeling well, I stirred up my anger and sat down to write a scathing, searing, insulting letter to one of the folks I'm mad at.

It's *really good!*

I finished the letter, then I hit the save button, and thought about how good it would feel to print

the letter and send it in the mail.

Funny thing, though. Writing that letter didn't make me feel any better... it just made me more angry.

Since I couldn't sleep, I decided to use another hour or so to start writing my homily for the weekend. I could get to work on a brilliant, life-changing, soul- saving sermon for the weekend!

So, having just spent 72 hour stoking my anger, and having just spent part of Friday evening writing delicious hate mail, I opened my prayer book and read the first sentence from today's first reading:

“Wrath and anger are hateful things, yet the sinner hugs them tight.”

You've got to be kidding.

I kept reading:

“The vengeful will experience the Lord's vengeance... So forgive your neighbor's injustice.”

Are you kidding me?

The reading went on – “If you nourish anger against someone, how can you expect God to heal you?”

You have GOT to be kidding me!

And don't even get me started on the Gospel reading:

I have to forgive countless times? I'm like the guy in the parable? I've been forgiven a HUGE debt? Then I turn around and refuse to forgive the smaller offenses of my neighbor? God will not forgive me if I refuse to forgive those who hurt me?

You have got to be kidding me!

Don't you hate when you come to church and it seems like the readings are hand-picked just for you? Especially when the message is precisely NOT what you want to hear?

Forgiveness is a tough topic, especially when you're angry. But in the Gospels, Jesus repeatedly makes it clear – *forgiveness is not optional. It is essential.*

After all, Jesus taught us to pray: “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us...” I’ve been praying that prayer since I was a child. I’m not sure I *mean* it.

A word of clarification: we’ve all heard that horrible saying, “Forgive and forget.” It’s horrible because *we don’t forget*.

Just as we can remember the most beautiful moments of our lives, and experience joy in remembering, so too can we remember the times in life when we’ve been hurt, and we feel that pain again.

Some Christians come to me and say, “I want to forgive that person, but I still remember what they did.” They have a misconception that *forgiving* means *forgetting*.

No. Forgiveness, at least in my experience, means that I can remember what you did to me, but I choose not to allow that memory of the past to control my present.

Yes, I can remember the pain, but that pain does not have to control me today. I can choose to live in the present, toward the future.

And, forgiveness does not mean that I have to allow you to keep doing something to me that is painful or destructive.

Christians believe that all of our actions have consequences. So the husband who is physically abusive to his wife cannot say to her, “You have to forgive me 7 times 7 times, while I keep hitting you...”

No. He needs to stop being abusive. Or he needs to move out. Or he needs to be arrested. She will need, eventually, to work on forgiving him.

But as a wise priest once said, “If someone has knocked you down and has put their foot on your neck, a Christian can say, ‘With God’s help, I will work to forgive you... but first you have to take your foot off my neck!’”

So, forgiveness is not a Christian way of pretending that things did not happen. Forgiveness is not Christian amnesia. Forgiveness is not a kind of approval that let’s bad people keep doing bad things.

But this week’s readings reminded me of another truth about forgiveness. And it’s this – forgiveness is not something I can demand that *other people should work on*. Forgiveness is

something I need to start doing. That's the only way our angry world gets healed.

As a preacher, I'm very good at telling other people what they should do! So I read the paper, and say to myself, "These white supremacists need to give up their angry rhetoric and their hate. Why can't they see how destructive their racial hatred is? Why can't they see how angry they are?"

Then I'll say, "Why can't some of these Black Lives Matter protesters give up their angry and hateful words? Can't they see how they are coming across?"

I say to myself, "Someone needs to go to Washington and preach about anger, hate and division. Republicans and Democrats alike can sound so angry and full of hate. Nothing gets accomplished that way."

And, on Thursday, people made some decisions that made my blood boil... and I realized...

I am becoming exactly the kind of angry and hateful person that I have been so frustrated by.

As I finished writing my whiz-bang hate mail Friday night, I realized: The only thing I've accomplished here is to become even less Christ-like. I sound as angry as a protestor on Monument Avenue. I sound as unhinged as Senator Feinstein as she suggests that Catholics are not fit to serve as judges. I sound as hateful as xenophobic protestors shouting that illegal aliens needs to be locked up.

Satan loves it when we allow other angry people to turn US into angry people.

What Jesus did is to show us another way. As he suffered on the cross, Jesus could have angrily called on his Father to send down wrath and ruin.

Instead, at the apex of his suffering, Jesus said, "Father, forgive them. They know not what they do."

Late Friday night, as I read the Scriptures for this weekend, that same Jesus tapped me on the shoulder and whispered, "Michael, forgiveness is not something that *someone else* needs to do. Letting go of anger is not something that *someone else* has to get working on. Turning away from hate is not a task you should tell *others* to undertake.

"Michael, wrath and anger are bad for *you*!

"Michael, vengeance is something that is bad for *you*.

“Michael, the unwillingness to forgive will harden *your* heart and sap *your* strength and turn you into the very kind of person you are frustrated by.

“So yes, I expect people to forgive 70 times 7 times. And the person who needs to start, Michael, is you.”

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