

24th Sunday-Year

SIR 27:30—28:7

PS 103

ROM 14:7-9

MT 18:21-35

Take Practical Steps to Restore Broken Relationships

Beloved in Christ, our readings today invite us to take practical steps to restore our broken relationships. The first reading from Sirach tells us not to hold on to anger, vengeance, and other hateful things but to forgive one another so that God will hear our prayer and forgive us.

Beloved, I received a beautiful email from a couple that I was privileged to walk through one of the most difficult moments in their marriage. One sentence in the email almost brought me to tears. It read: "Father, we have come to realize that God is faithful, and no matter how "crazy" life gets, God is always up to something good." I got to know this couple for 12 years ago. The woman was Christian, but the husband did not believe in God even though he had been baptized as a child. After two years of happy married life, things started going wrong. The husband lost his job, got depressed, started drinking heavily, and began withdrawing from his wife and children. The wife cried and prayed, but the situation only seemed to get worse. As if these problems were not enough, the wife found out that her husband had a child with another woman. The wife decided she could not do it any longer and asked for a divorce. One the day she was to sign the papers, she decided to go into the chapel, pray before the blessed sacrament, and then sign. As she was praying, she heard a voice, "Don't do it! Forgive him! Carry his sufferings with him." And She responded, God, I can't. But with tears in her eyes, she went back home and told the husband I forgive you! Those words turned the husband's life around. He apologized to his wife. After five years of working through these challenges together as a couple, through counseling, therapy, etc., the husband stopped the affair and the drinking. He and the wife accepted the new baby, and he is living with them now. Beloved, that is what God can do when we dare to put his words into practice. Is it easy to do? No! But is it the path that leads to life? Yes!

You may be thinking, good for this woman! It worked out for her, but what about those instances of forgiveness that may not end like her story? What about those instances where you forgive and the person actually even does worse things? What should you do? Our gospel reading answers that question. The Jewish teaching at the time of Jesus was that the Israelites were supposed to forgive a person three times in gratitude to God, who saved them from slavery in Egypt, and after three times, one was not obliged to forgive. So when Peter asked Jesus whether to forgive 7 times, he thought he was being very generous. But Jesus says, no, even seven is not enough. We have to forgive seventy times seven times, which means infinite or always. Why does Jesus ask us to do this? Because that is how our Heavenly Father treats us. Can you imagine if God forgives us only seven times? I am very grateful that God does not stop at seven. If God were to mark our sin, who would survive? If I had only seven chances, where would I be? I thank God that he is loving and merciful and forgives eternally. Beloved, the whole business of Christianity is about restoration. God is restoring the world, and his invitation to us is to join him to do precisely that. It would have been easy if our job was just to be cheerleaders. God did not call us to be cheerleaders, but participants who will enter the game and play with him. Forgiveness comes from God, but somebody has to make that forgiveness concrete for his people.

St. Paul tells us that we are so essential to God's restoration of the world through forgiveness that we should live for that, and even if it takes our lives, we should die for it. Why is St. Paul saying that? Because he has come to know that with God, every risk is worth taking. God will bring something good out of every risk you take for his name. Living God's call to forgive may not be easy, but God will not let your effort be in vain. Beloved, I don't always succeed in forgiving others, but there are times I actually do. Three things have worked for me. First, anytime I find it difficult to forgive somebody, I go to confession. Not because I think I am at fault, but because I need the grace to forgive. Receiving God's forgiveness always reminds me that I need to forgive too. Second, after going to confession, I spend time to forgive myself. It reminds me that somebody needs forgiveness too. And finally, I talk to my spiritual director or somebody to help me work through the pain and hurt to be able to forgive. Beloved, there are some hurts that you might have experienced that might be traumatic, and would not just go away because you told people you have forgiven them. If you need counseling, therapy, spiritual direction, or any other professional help to overcome the pain and be able to forgive, please seek it. May God give us the grant us the gift of his heart so that we can love the way he loves us.