

TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

September 13, 2020 A

Facilitator: *Let us take a minute to consciously acknowledge that we are in the presence of God and ask him to help us to hear the Word he wants us to hear this week.*

Pause for a moment and then play a religious song.

Opening prayer: *Merciful God, in today's readings, you challenge us to forgive life's hurts and not bottle them up in our heart. You forgive us over and over. Help us to offer the same forgiveness to others. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Response to last week's Word: [Facilitator briefly recalls last week's Gospel.] *Let us spend a few minutes sharing how the Word we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week.*

Facilitator reads focus statement: The first and third readings build on last week's readings which dealt with the handling of disputes among individuals within the community. Both readings give us a strong message on forgiveness. If we are to be like God, we must forgive each other over and over. In the second reading, Paul addresses a dispute that persists between the Gentile and Jewish Christians.

Let us listen to God's Word to hear what it is he wants to say to us in these readings today. As you hear a word, you may want to underline it or write it down to remember.

Read the first reading, the psalm and the second reading, pausing briefly after each one.

FIRST READING: Sirach 27:30; 28:7

As you may know, the first reading of our three Sunday readings is chosen to connect or underline the message of the Gospel. Sometimes this is easy to see, sometimes it is not. The connection this Sunday is easy to notice. Both this reading and the Gospel illustrate the connection between forgiving and being forgiven: Sirach asks:

*Could anyone nourish anger against another
and expect healing from the Lord?*

The reason a person does not receive healing from the Lord is that the sinner holds onto grudges and is unrepentant.

*Wrath and anger are hateful things
yet the sinner hugs them tight
If one who is flesh cherishes wrath,
who will forgive his sins?*

As recipients of God's love and mercy, we are also expected to show love and mercy to others.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 103

This psalm is a meditation on the merciful face of God, which the Israelites have come to know so well through their history of sin and forgiveness.

SECOND READING: Romans 14:7-9

Paul is in the middle of commenting on some small disagreements between church members in his Roman

community. Some are Jewish Christians and some are Gentile Christians. They have different ideas about what one is allowed to eat and how one should fast.

Paul urges this community to refrain from judging each other, for all are seeking to serve the Lord. If some people are abstaining for certain foods out of love for the Lord, then we should not judge. Judgement is God's business, not ours. Our job is to love people. God's job is to judge them.

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL: Matt. 18:21-38

As we listen to this first reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our minds for the content.

**A participant reads the Gospel,
then all pause to reflect.**

As we listen to this second reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying to us. Be aware of what draws us in and what part of the Gospel might be a challenge to embrace. You may want to underline or write down the word you hear.

GOSPEL: Matthew 18:21-35

The Gospel opens with Peter seeking to place a limit on how often he must forgive someone who offends him over and over. Surely, forgiving someone seven times should be enough. But Jesus disagrees, saying he should forgive not seven times but seventy times seven. In other words, Jesus puts no limit on forgiveness.

To illustrate his point further, Jesus tells a parable, often called the kingdom parable because he tells how things are to be in the new kingdom that he is inaugurating. In the parable, the king stands for God, and the servant stands for all of us. The king shows *great mercy* to the servant who owes a *huge* debt. The expectation is that the forgiven servant will also show mercy to the one who owes him much less. When this does not happen, the king (representing God) is not happy.

The parable grounds forgiveness in the nature of God. We are to heed the intent of the parable at its conclusion: it solemnly warns us that we must fervently pray for strength to resist the temptation to get even with those who have hurt us, and pray for the grace to reflect the majestic generosity of the Kingdom of God.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Turn to the person next to you and share what verse or image in the readings caught your attention or drew you in. Was there a verse or aspect of the readings that challenged you?

The facilitator can decide which is more helpful: to share the next questions with the whole group, or to share in smaller groups of three or four.

2. What are the obstacles to forgiving others? Name as many obstacles as possible, e.g., pride, the belief that someone does not deserve mercy, hardness of heart, etc., then name the primary obstacle that you may face in forgiving a hurt.

3. What helps you to forgive life's hurts? What might help you to overcome whatever you name as the primary obstacle to forgiving life's hurts?

4. In the second reading, Paul is urging people not to judge others. In your opinion, what can cause us to be judgmental of others?

5. Name one thing today's Gospel says to us that we disciples of Jesus need to heed and act on.

RESPONDING TO GOD'S WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week's readings. Suggestion: If there is someone whom you have not forgiven, begin to pray for that person and for the grace to forgive him/her.

JOURNALING. *Having listened to God's Word and listened to others' reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what you are hearing God say to you. Your response will be what you bring to Eucharist on Sunday, asking Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you. When ready, jot down your reflections.*

PRAYING WITH THE WORD

Facilitator: Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestion: *Jesus, forgiving big hurts is one of the most challenging things asked of a disciple. When faced with this issue, help me to always remember how frequently you have had to forgive my big and small sins.*

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Pray especially for all who have little or no desire to forgive those who have hurt them.

CLOSING PRAYER (together)

Jesus, you know the way I feel about _____. You know my lack of desire to forgive. You know that all I want to do is to get even with him. But I also know that holding onto a hardened, unforgiving heart is bad for my body, mind, and spirit. It hurts me more than it hurts my offender. It also hurts my relationship with you.

Jesus, I admit my helplessness and powerlessness when it comes to even thinking about forgiving _____. But I also know that all things are possible for those who cooperate with your grace. With Saint Paul, I believe that I can do all things in you who strengthens me. Empower me, Jesus, to do this work of forgiveness. Place within my heart the desire to forgive _____. I find it so hard to even make that request because my heart has so much venom toward _____. But I make the request, however feebly, hoping that you will give me the grace to do what I am powerless to do for myself.

Note for Non-Ascension Parishioners: When it comes to dealing with life's hurts, many people have found my book *How to Forgive Yourself & Others* very helpful. It is available in English and Spanish.