

Homily: Sept. 17, 2023

By Fr. Virgil Petermeier, osc

Today we celebrate our God who is forgiving and merciful, all the time. Forgiveness is the signature element of being Christian and of loving one another. We open ourselves to God's forgiving love, by calling out, "Lord, have mercy."

This is a wonderful story about mercifully forgiving and unmercifully not forgiving. The Jerusalem Bible states that the debt was the equivalent of nine million dollars or in Jesus' time, fifteen years of wages. It was purposely a huge unpayable amount. Yet, the master, representing God, forgives the servant who begged for mercy and promised to pay back everything he owed. God knew this was impossible. God not only forgave him, but wiped out his debt. This boundless forgiveness by God becomes the basis for our having to be forgiving to all others all the time, too.

Consequently, Jesus answers Peter's question about how often Peter must forgive, and Jesus says, "Seventy-seven" times, which was Hebrew symbolism for ALL people EVERYTIME. I think, we frankly would like to argue with Jesus, saying, "But when I forgive my husband several times and he does the same thing over and over again, it's time to stop forgiving him. If I keep forgiving him, he'll just keep doing the same old thing."

Yes, if we are honest, we often think we can change people by forgiving them or by asking for an apology. Unfortunately, we forget that WE CAN NOT CHANGE A PERSON. WE ARE NOT GOD. It occurred to me that even Jesus' prayer for forgiveness did not change or stop the men from crucifying him. What we don't know is how Jesus' forgiveness maybe did have impact on those men later on. The centurion, who participated in and witnessed Jesus' goodness as Jesus died said, "This was a great and good man."

We can have hopes that our goodness, suggestions, and advice have impact. BUT WE CAN NOT FORCE NOR MANIPULATE A PERSON'S CHANGE OF HEART. We can only invite change, and then let the rest to God working in that person. We must believe that God's forgiving spirit is at work. Even God does not force that change in a person. God, our mother/father, invites our goodness by flooding us with all sorts of goodness---flowers, singing birds, a good joke from someone, a smile or greeting from another. Over and over, God is inviting the best from of us. Over and over, God is being patient with our obtuse self, our being unaware of God's abundant goodness all around us in thousands of forms.

However, if we do not live according to God's merciful & forgiving love. If we don't truly believe that we are forgiven, we will continue to blame and beat up ourselves for some past mistake. Self-hatred will grow, we will isolate ourselves. Many more ugly symptoms may occur until we open ourselves to God's forgiveness and goodness desire to become good, and finally forgive others and accept forgiveness for our past mistakes.

I will never forget a scene during my mission days in Papua, Indonesia---part of the large island of New Guinea. Leading the liturgy, I was sitting on the floor at the edge a mat that served as the altar. We were in the opening rite of reconciliation, recalling God's forgiving mercy. Suddenly, I see a man get up and walk across the back of the church to another man, to whom he handed a ball of fresh sago bread. Later, people explained to me, that they, too, were surprised when this man went to that particular person.

The villagers all knew these two men didn't get along. What they witnessed that morning between these two men really was a double miracle. One man forgiving by offering food and the other man being willing to receive forgiveness and accept the bread. This gift of bread was a traditional tribal form of reconciliation.

How wonderful that, at each Eucharist, Jesus, the Christ of God, gives us his precious body in the form of bread, too. Communion becomes an action, not merely a sign, of reconciling love with God, others, and ourselves. Participation in the Sacred meal of Eucharist can strengthen us in being more and more merciful.

God, Jesus, and their Holy Spirit have shown us how to forgive and reconcile. So did the tribal villager in Papua, who gave food as an action of peacemaking. Now, we must ask ourselves, "Whom do I have to forgive? Perhaps there are people, often right in our very families. Or closer yet--we may still need to accept ourselves forgivingly, rather than continuing to beat ourselves up for some past mistake, little or big. When we do not accept God's forgiveness for ourselves, we will tend not to forgive others.

As the Psalmist said a few minutes ago, "The Lord is kind and merciful, slow to anger and rich in compassion." So must we be, for ourselves and for others. Amen and Amen!