

## *24th Sunday in Ordinary Time*

**“I can never forgive you” is an expression people sometimes say to someone who has committed a particularly grave offense against them. It may be said to someone who was once a close friend or associate, even a lover or a spouse. The original intimacies make the recent offense all the greater and cause the offended person to insist that forgiveness is off the table.**

**Today’s parables about forgiveness comfort the Christian community because they give hope when we are the sinner. But they perplex individual Christians when someone has sinned against them. It’s one thing to rejoice that God forgives us. But it’s something else to feel that the person who sinned against us does not merit our forgiveness.**

**All three parables are well known: the wandering sheep, the lost coin and the prodigal son. The first two are perfect parallels: A sheep goes astray, the shepherd searches and finds, and then the friends and neighbors rejoice. A coin is lost, the woman searches and finds, and then her friends and neighbors rejoice. But in the third parable, the son takes his inheritance, abandons his home, experiences poverty, finds himself and returns. Then his father invites people to rejoice, but his brother thinks this is not such a good idea. Each story begins with a different kind of loss: The sheep wandered away innocently; the woman absent-mindedly dropped the coin - she is partly at fault; the son chose to leave. The three reasons for loss are: ignorance, carelessness, and decision.**

**When somebody offends us, they may fall into any of those categories. They may be unaware they did something wrong. You may be partly at fault. Or the person you love may have deliberately chosen to defy your wishes. All these losses hurt, but the last case hurts the worst.**

**Even so, some offenses hurt more than the one committed by the prodigal son. There isn’t much at stake if the father welcomes him back home. The kid has already squandered his share of the inheritance. He cannot get it again. But what about someone whose return would be dangerous? What if the person was an abuser? A bully? A compulsive gambler? What if they say they’re sorry but they really cannot change?**

**Not all offenses are the same, and not all forgiveness is the same. Saying “I forgive you” does not have to mean “I take you back the way you were.” It can also mean, “I can forgive what you did, and I’m not going to give you a chance to do it again.” You can forgive and punish at the same time; parents do it with children every day. These parables presume circumstances when God can say to us, “I forgive you,” but they don’t handle the circumstances of a dangerous person seeking access to commit sin again. In those cases we may forgive and exclude. But they should also warn us about the sins we commit. If we tell God we’re sorry, even in the confessional, yet we intend to sin again, it raises questions about how sorry we are. God will forgive, but we should repent.**

**Jesus welcomed sinners and ate with them. Forgiveness is central to Christianity. It reassures us when we stray, it encourages us to forgive others, but forgiveness does not exempt us from being cautious about those who once hurt and could hurt again.**

*Sunday, September 15, 2019*