

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Is it weak to forgive? In our culture the prevailing opinion seems to be, “Yes. Don’t forgive.” People think strength lies in excluding those who offend us, seeking retribution against them, and holding grudges no matter how old the trespass. When you’re a victim, you may assert your self-worth by showing how different you are from those who did you wrong. Withholding forgiveness exercises power over someone who tried to make you powerless. Not forgiving arises from a false sense of virtuousness. The person who caused the hurt displayed a low bar of morality, so those who are offended distance themselves from that behavior by stoking their own anger. They think not forgiving is virtuous—that the size of the offense justifies the refusal to forgive.

Now, “forgiveness” is a tricky word. People sometimes equate it with forgetfulness—or weakness. Occasionally you may hear someone begging your forgiveness for an offense you didn’t notice at all. You may feel confused or bothered by their apology if what they did wasn’t really a big deal to you. Somehow it was to them, so they deserve to hear words of forgiveness. But other times the offense was huge. 9/11 is a perfect example. Because of the actions of someone else, you may have lost your innocence, your safety, your dignity, or the life of someone you love. The person who offended you may be in prison because they’re dangerous. Forgiveness does not mean letting them out. That could be reckless. As every parent knows, forgiveness is one expression of love, but so is punishment. It is possible to punish a child, forgive a child, and love a child—all at the same time. That is also true for how we treat those who offend us. It’s just harder because we don’t naturally love them. They don’t have the head start a kid gets.

Today’s gospel explores two different aspects of forgiveness: how many times to offer it, and the hypocrisy of some who receive it. Both aspects confront the difficulty of forgiving. In the first instance, it’s hard to forgive someone who repeats the same offense over and over again. They’re exasperating. They may turn us to our own misbehavior—we may belittle the offender, whine about our torment, or speak angry words to people we love—words we later regret. Often we think that someone’s repeated sin against us entitles us to complain and strike back. Jesus says, “Not really. Umm, seventy-seven times. You forgive that person seventy-seven times. Don’t forget they’re struggling with the inability to change something you find annoying. Give ‘em a break.”

In the second instance of this gospel, some people who receive forgiveness refuse to give it to others. That’s the point of Jesus’ extended parable. The servant who caught a break does not give one to someone who offended him. To him, that would be weak. Well, a worse future befalls the forgiven servant who does not forgive someone else, and Jesus warns the same punishment can come to us.

If we ever think forgiving is weak, we do well to reflect on how often we have received forgiveness. The people who love us have forgiven us seventy-seven times, and they’d do it seventy-seven times more. When God forgives our sins, he expects us to forgive in turn. Jesus would probably say to our society, we have weakness all wrong. Not forgiving is weak. Forgiving is strong.