

I. Introduction

- A. Two little brothers, Harry and James, had finished supper and were playing until bedtime. Somehow, Harry hit James with a stick, and tears and bitter words followed. Charges and accusations were still being exchanged as their mother prepared them for bed. She said, "Now boys, what would happen if either of you died tonight and you never had the opportunity again for forgiving one another?" James spoke up, "Well, OK, I'll forgive him tonight, but if we're both alive in the morning, he'd better look out."--
-Kayala website
- B. Saying "I forgive" is a lot harder than actually forgiving, isn't it?
- C. Fr. Ron Rolheiser recalls a story told by Nikos Kazantzakis, the Greek writer, about an elderly monk he once met on Mount Athos. Kazantzakis, still young and full of curiosity, was questioning this monk and asked him: "Do you still wrestle with the devil?" "No," replied the old monk, "I used to, when I was younger, but now I've grown old and tired and the devil has grown old and tired with me." "So," Kazantzakis said, "your life is easy then? No more big struggles." "Oh, no!" replied the old man, "now it's worse. Now I wrestle with God!" "You wrestle with God," replied Kazantzakis, rather surprised, "and you hope to win?" "No," said the old monk, "I wrestle with God and I hope to lose!" (liturgy.slu.edu, Sept. 13, 2020)

II. Hoping to Lose

- A. I love that line: "I wrestle with God and I hope to lose!" Isn't that a great way to summarize our spiritual and moral struggles in life? We want to do what God asks, but it's hard and we have to wrestle with God, often for a long time, before we give in and let God win.
- B. I suspect one of the challenges we most often wrestle with is Jesus' teaching about forgiveness. Rolheiser comments on the story of the monk: "There comes a point in life when our major spiritual struggle is no longer with the fact that we are weak and desperately in need of God's forgiveness, but rather with the opposite, with the fact that God's grace and forgiveness is overly-lavish, unmerited, and especially that it goes out so indiscriminately." (*Ibid.*)

III. Incomprehensible Forgiveness

- A. In today's Gospel parable, Jesus takes this teaching to incredible heights. To fully understand the parable, we need to translate a bit. Fr. Dennis Hamm explains: "Seeing that Peter wants to quantify forgiveness, Jesus tells a parable about forgiveness using numbers whose proportions are absurd. ('You want to talk numbers? I'll give you some numbers to think about.') Jesus tells of a king calling his debtors to account and dealing with one who owes him ten thousand talents. Now, a single talent was a huge amount of silver, worth, our lexicons tell us, around 10,000 denarii (and a denarius was worth a day's labor). Thus, 10,000 talents would come to a hundred million denarii. If you like, you can estimate what a day's worth of labor is worth today in dollars and then multiply that by 100,000,000. But just trying to think of an amount worth the salary of 100,000,000 days' labor should be enough to help us realize that the NAB's paraphrase for 'ten thousand talents'—'a huge amount'—while correct, is really an understatement.
- "When the king orders the debtor, along with his family and property, to be sold to recover a little of the debt, our debtor begs for mercy and makes the absurd promise that he will pay the debt 'in full.' The king overlooks the absurdity, allows himself to be moved by compassion, and forgives the man outright.
- ...
- Jesus' (satiric) numbers game answering Peter's (misguidedly serious) numbers game is there for us to contemplate, if we dare to measure how much the Lord would have us forgive one another." (*Ibid.*)
- B. You might have noticed that our current translation says we have to forgive seventy-seven times; I grew up hearing seventy times seven times. Scholars likely debate whether it is seventy-seven or four hundred ninety times, but that misses the point. Jesus is insisting that there is no limit to the command to forgive, just as there is no limit to God's forgiveness.

- C. St. Augustine reminds us, “And so, every day we pray; every day we beat upon God’s ears with our pleas; every day we prostrate ourselves before him saying: ‘Forgive us our trespasses, as we also forgive those who trespass against us.’
“Which of our trespasses, all of them or only some? All, you will answer.
“Do likewise, therefore, with those who have offended you.” (Ibid.)

IV. Breaking the Chain

- A. When I was in the seminary, I read and re-read the diary of Dag Hammarskjöld, the Swedish born Secretary General of the United Nations who died in a plane crash in 1961 that many think was an assassination. The book is called *Markings*, and on Easter Sunday, 1960, he wrote: “Forgiveness breaks the chain of causality because he who ‘forgives’ you—out of love—takes upon himself the consequences of what you have done. Forgiveness, therefore, always entails a sacrifice.
“The price you must pay for your own liberation through another’s sacrifice, is that you in turn must be willing to liberate in the same way, irrespective of the consequences to yourself.” (*Markings*, p. 163)
- B. Fr. John Foley comments on the Gospel parable: “What is the lesson? That the deepest motivation for forgiveness is loving gratitude.
“If someone has forgiven me out of love, then my authentic reaction will be deep appreciation. I will want spontaneously to pass the gift on. It follows that if God has forgiven me, I will want to give to anyone else the same liberation I have received.
“By doing so you or I halt the chain of causality and pass along love instead of hate.” (liturgy.slu.edu, Sept. 13, 2020)
- C. What Jesus is inviting us to embrace is a whole different way of thinking, reacting, and living. Speaking in South Korea in 2014, Pope Francis taught: “Jesus asks us to believe that forgiveness is the door which leads to reconciliation. In telling us to forgive our brothers (and sisters) unreservedly, he is asking us to do something utterly radical, but he also gives us the grace to do it. What appears, from a human perspective, to be impossible, impractical and even at times repugnant, he makes possible and fruitful through the infinite power of his cross. The cross of Christ reveals the power of God to bridge every division, to heal every wound, and to reestablish the original bonds of brotherly love. (Homily, Holy Mass for Peace and Reconciliation, Cathedral of Myeong-dong, Seoul, August 18, 2014)

V. Conclusion

- A. Fr. John Kavanaugh offers a good summation of the issue: “The great tragedy is that if we wish to exempt ourselves from the law of Jesus, the law of love and forgiveness; if we establish for ourselves a new reality; if vengeance and retribution are what we embrace as most true and reliable, then that is what we are left with. Hell is not so much the punishment by God as it is the result that our punishment of each other demands.
“In the church, in our families, in our hearts, we have all experienced the logic of unforgiveness. Even at the age of five, a child might be heard to mutter, ‘I’ll never talk to them again.’ If the judgment hardens, it is only the heart of the judge that grows cold. The words, ‘I will never forgive you,’ can shut tight the heart of the one who utters them, definitively deadened and alone.
“It is true, as the psalmist said, that ‘the Lord is kind and merciful, slow to anger and rich in compassion.’ But in our refusal to accept the reality of Jesus, we enthrone the reality of resentment as the law of life. There is an unyielding recalcitrance about unforgiveness. It is a rejection of love. We refuse to give it; we make it impossible to receive it.
“When the Lord answers Peter’s question, how often we should forgive, he says, ‘not seven times but seventy times seven times.’ Jesus is not recommending a mathematics of reconciliation. He is using the extreme numbers to suggest the unbridgeable chasm between a forgiving and an unforgiving universe. His parable may be less about the retribution of God than it is about a state of soul so hardened that even a kind and compassionate God could not soften it.” (liturgy.slu.edu, Sept. 13, 2020)
- B. What kind of universe do you want to live in: a forgiving one or an unforgiving one? We know which one Jesus offers us. Which one will we help create?