

Homily  
September 17, 2023  
24<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
25:12 – 35:30

I am sure you have noticed that throughout the Old Testament, into the New Testament, numbers play a large role.

Three: The Trinity

Two: The two natures in Jesus

One: One God

Forty: A long time

And Seven: Seven is perfection, completion. It is God's number.

And so, we hear once again from Peter this morning. "How often must I forgive my brother? Up to seven times?" And we know Jesus' immediate response, "No..." In one translation, "Seventy-seven times," ours today. In another, "Seventy times seven times." In other words, always.

Now Jesus' response is surprisingly reminiscent of Genesis Chapter 4, verse 24. In that verse, so early in the first book of the Bible, Lamech, the great-great-great grandson of Cain (You remember who Cain was; remember he killed his brother, Abel.) Lamech declares blood vengeance up to seventy times seven times. For him, vengeance is limitless.

But Jesus speaks with a decidedly opposite understanding. Forgiveness is to be without frontiers, limitless. Where did he get such an idea?

Well, more likely than not, Jesus knew the Wisdom writings, such as our First Reading from Sirach. His most recent Jewish ancestors had reflected upon the history of God's recurring forgiveness. They had come to a change of understanding and seen the foolishness of vengeance. Jesus thus takes their thinking to its ultimate conclusion. Forgiveness is to be a way of life.

Interestingly, the parable that follows this new teaching is not about unlimited forgiveness. It's about what it takes to be able to live this way of life.

Have you ever been audited? Not by the IRS. That's terrifying enough. But someone who comes in and examines "the books"? To see if you're doing it correctly. That too, can be a fearful thing.

Well in the Gospel, the master's audit, once the books have been crunched, reveals a huge amount that is owed by a servant. In another translation, it actually says the huge amount was 10,000 talents. Well, how huge is that?

The “talent” was the largest unit of money known in the ancient Near East. Ten Thousand such units, one scholar states, would have been the equivalent of one year’s income of the entire Roman Province of Asia. In other words, the entire gross domestic product for one year. Paying back such an amount would have been a pointless futility.

And so the master in our parable decides to recoup a small portion of what was owed by selling the servant and his entire family and all his possessions. This would be a punishment of the servant and a warning to his fellow servants.

We know that the condemned servant begs for the master’s patience, that he might repay the debt. Admittedly, such a plea is unrealistic. But the servant is desperate.

Amazingly, the master in the parable relents in the face of such a hopeless situation and in a fit of compassion, he forgives the debt entirely.

Well, if the parable ended here, it would be a wonderful description of God’s limitless compassion and forgiveness. But the story does not end here, does it? For it points ultimately not to God’s limitlessness. It is about a way of life.

And so we see the newly forgiven servant rushing out, apparently to tell any and all of his unimaginable good fortune. “Look what happened! It’s wonderful! “

But instead, what does happen has nothing to do with joy or thankfulness. For he encounters one of his peers, a servant of the same master, who owes a much smaller amount. In one translation, 100 Denari, which is about one third of a person’s annual income. (Which is for some of us, what the IRS takes out of our checks.)

The newly forgiven servant seems to have no recollection of what just happened. He physically abuses his fellow servant and throws him into debtors’ prison to repay the debt, which was very manageable.

The master, initially compassionate and forgiving, exercises justice for the sake of the powerless servant. He declares the forgiven servant, now seen as the unforgiving servant, to be wicked. Not because of the astronomical debt that he owed, but because he has not understood or taken to heart the gift he had received.

It would seem that mercy and forgiveness happened to him. The happening, however, was nothing more to him than a lucky event. The result was no change in his view of the world. He therefore continued to live as he had before, even though the world around him was now a different place.

This is the ultimate meaning of the story: *metanoia*, change. Be changed by what you experience.

My brothers and sisters, we know through Christ that we cannot earn God’s forgiveness. God freely gives it. However, we can lose it, by not being forgiving. And as the parable indicates, the loving Father will condemn us to eternal punishment, if we do not lovingly forgive one another.

As I was reflecting upon this this week, it occurred to me to ask the following question: How often do we not ask for forgiveness because we know we will have to change the way we live, if we are forgiven? We avoid the gift to avoid the change.

Yet, the very nature of God is to be forgiving. Psalm 51 and the other Penitential Psalms consistently reveal this to us.

And so, I want to encourage all of us this week to take up Psalm 51. Pray it. Reflect upon it. And then pray the Lord's Prayer, the Our Father. Through these two Biblical lenses, see yourself. Admit that you and I need forgiveness. And know that our debt has been paid through Christ.

Therefore, as we have received, so we are to give. And I encourage us, don't do this just one day. Do it each day of the seven days. (You get the number, right?) Do it daily. For we know that you and I can so easily forget what we have been given and how we are to live forgiveness, our way of life in Christ.