

Blessed Are the Merciful **24th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A-2011)**

This conversation between Peter and Jesus is really a **commentary** on the fifth beatitude, which Jesus stated way back in Chapter 5 of St. Matthew's Gospel: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy."

Mercy goes **against** our fallen human nature.

- Automatically, we tend to play favorites, hold grudges, resent insults, demand our "rights," and care much more about our own hopes, plans, and problems than about others'.
- When we do take an interest in other people, it's usually because we like them, and not because we view them as so valued by God that he sent his Son to die on the cross for them.
- When we operate on this **merely natural level**, we always run into a **limit** in our ability to forgive those who offend or harm us.

But Jesus is teaching us today that a Christian is called to be **limitless** in forgiveness: to be merciful as God is merciful.

- We are **glad** that God is gentle and patient with us,
- always willing to forgive us,
- always showering us with his blessings,
- always there when we need him,
- always ready to understand us,
- always ready to sympathize with us before judging us...
- in short, we are glad that God is merciful with us, although we know we don't really deserve it.

And yet, we are often **reluctant** to be like that with others, just like the man in the parable.

If we don't let God help us **overcome** that reluctance, our hearts will become so **closed** that eventually Christ's mercy simply won't be able to get in.

If we **do** overcome it, they will open wider and wider, allowing the full flood of God's love to inundate them, making them an oasis for others who suffer, and a magnet for their kindness and generosity.

Blessed indeed are the merciful, for showing mercy is the only way to attract it.

A Woman Forgives Her Attacker

Forgiveness doesn't mean **ignoring** an offense or a crime, pretending it never happened.

Forgiveness, mercy, means refusing to let someone else's sin **define** your life.

- This is what Jesus showed us on the Cross, when he **forgave his executioners**.
- The devil was doing everything possible to force Jesus to break his own principles, to **stop loving**.
- But Jesus stayed true to his mission and his message: **loving without limits**.
- And that is the path to true interior peace and strength for all of us.

Even on a merely **human** level, forgiveness **frees and strengthens** our hearts.

The case of **Jo Nodding**, victim of a violent attack and rape in 2004, is an eloquent example.

- Her attacker **denied** his guilt and forced a trial, which only added pain and suffering to her and her family.
- At one point in the trial, the judge said to the attacker: "You have **destroyed** this woman's life."
- That didn't sit well with Jo; she didn't want it to be that way.

During the process, she was visited by a victim liaison officer who mentioned the possibility of "**restorative justice**," of Jo actually going to the prison to meet with her attacker.

- The idea stayed with her, and four years later, after plenty of preparation, the man agreed to a meeting.
- They met in the prison, and Jo explained to the young man how his crime had affected her.
- He was brought to tears by what she said.
- She hadn't been expecting an apology, but he gave her one.

This is how she herself describes the end of their meeting:

- *As the meeting was finishing I was asked if there was anything else I wanted to say, and I gave him what I've later come to think of as 'a gift'.*
- *I said to him "What I am about to say to you a lot of people would find hard to understand, but I forgive you for what you did to me. Hatred just eats you up and I want you to go on and have a successful life. If you haven't already forgiven yourself, then I hope in the future you will."*
- *I didn't say it to excuse what he did, or to minimize it, but because I wanted myself to be free of that burden of grievance, and as importantly for me, I hoped Darren could learn, move on, and forgive himself.*
- *This had a massive impact on Darren – I could see he was shaken by the parting 'gift' I had given him. As I was leaving I wished him good luck for the future...*
- *As I left that room I felt on top of the world. Meeting him gave me closure, because I had said everything I had wanted to say and I had taken back some kind of control over my life.*
- *I know it had an impact on him. I'm not a victim any more, I'm a survivor. I've been able to make sure something good has come out of something bad.*

This is what forgiveness does, even just on a natural level: it makes sure that **something good comes out of something bad**, it sets our hearts **free** to love more like Christ loves, and that is the secret to the happiness that we all crave.

Forgiving the Tough Stuff

With practice, we can all learn to forgive the **little offenses** of every day.

It's harder, though, to forgive the **big things**.

- Sooner or later, each of us will have to forgive a **major offense**, maybe even a life-shattering **wound** inflicted by someone we love dearly.
- Or we may run into a situation in which we **ourselves** have committed a sin so grave that we can't seem to forgive **ourselves**, even though we know God has forgiven us.
- In these cases, it's much **harder** to follow Christ's command of limitless mercy, but not **impossible**.

Theologians rightly teach us that forgiveness is an **act of the will**.

- It is a **decision** to **let go** of the desire for revenge and **release** the offender into the hands of God.
- Now, that decision takes place at **such** a deep level of the soul that it can exist **at the same time** as strong emotions of **anger or resentment**.
- Those emotions don't flow from the **will**, like our decisions, but are simply **natural reactions** to the experience of injustice, feelings which we cannot always control.
- But our decisions, our choices, exist at the very **core** of the soul, in the will, and those we **can** control.
- In other words, it is possible to **truly forgive someone** and **at the same time** to still have **feelings** of anger or resentment towards them.
- When that happens, we have to counteract the feelings by **prayer** and by turning our attention to **more productive things**.
- Eventually, though it may take a long time, God's grace will **overflow** from our will, where we have already forgiven the offender, and heal our **emotions**.

You know the sequence and choice of these readings were put together many years ago, but I cannot help but see the hand of God in having them occur on this particular weekend as the nation observes the 10th anniversary of the 9/11 tragedy. We cannot control the hatred and anger of others. Unfortunately, we know that there are people in the world who are committed to hurting others through violence and terrorism. We certainly should protect ourselves as best we can, but, as Christians, we also have to pray for them. We have to forgive them. If we as a nation nurture hatred and vengeance, it will destroy us long before any group of terrorists. As Christians we must be the example, and perhaps we need to start right now in our own lives.

As we continue with this Mass, let's renew our **faith** in God's **limitless mercy**, and beg him with all our hearts for the grace we need to treat **others** just as he has treated **us**. 🙏🙏🙏