

Archbishop Lori's Homily: 7th Sunday in Ordinary Time; Our Lady of Good Counsel

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Feb. 24, 2019

Introduction

Often we who are bishops and priests learn the Gospel from those we serve. I certainly learned the meaning of today's Gospel about forgiveness from a parishioner in one of the first parishes I served in. I got to know her pretty well. I admired her upbeat outlook and her generous spirit of service of the poor. If there was a parish project to be done, she was always available as a willing participant and a team player.

But it was only when I sat down and talked with her one day that I learned of her struggles and, at the same time, the depth of her goodness. That day she described for me what her life was like growing up. She told me about the anger and dysfunction in her family and about a terrible hurt, a spiritual and psychological wound, that one of her siblings inflicted upon her. It took her a long time and a lot of help to work through that trauma and she was very grateful to all those who helped her on the way. But she added this – she said, “I knew I’d never heal unless I forgave my brother from my heart. It was the hardest thing I’ve ever done – but also the most liberating.” When she said that to me, today's Gospel passage flashed into my mind. Her example of forgiveness and mercy still helps me understand what it really means.

The Gospel of Mercy

What does Jesus say to you and me today? “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.” The Lord

goes on to describe a superhuman generosity. He tells us to lend without expecting any return, to go the extra mile when someone importunes us, and to love those who may never love us in return. And we may be tempted to think that this portion of Jesus' "Sermon on the Plain" is full of nice ideas, so nice, in fact, that are in too difficult for any normal person to put into practice.

And Jesus' words would be just that if it were not for the fact that the Lord has loved us first with an exquisitely merciful love. When the Pharisees became indignant because Jesus associated with sinners, he told them that he was sent not for the righteous but sinners. When he hung dying upon the Cross, Jesus gave us the supreme example of forgiving one's enemies: "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do," he said. When Jesus describes the meek and merciful in the Beatitudes, he is really painting a portrait of himself. For, as he said elsewhere, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart and you will find rest for your souls."

More Than Words

Jesus' mercy is more than words from the far distant past. Rather, divine mercy reaches us today, in palpable form, both in the Word proclaimed – in which Christ himself speaks to us – but also in the Sacraments that we are privileged to receive. It is no accident that just prior to our reception of Holy Communion we pray the Lord's Prayer, the Our Father, that includes this petition: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." We can only hope to do this because, in Holy Communion, we receive the One who is Mercy Incarnate, the One who is the Source of Mercy – who loved us so much that he died so save us. It is in receiving Jesus that we find the strength to forgive those who trespass against us, even grievously. And, in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the mercy of Jesus is applied directly to the wounds of our existence, as epitomized by our sins. As we hear the words of absolution what love, joy, and freedom should wash across our souls as we say with St. Paul, "He loves me and he gave his life for me!" In the Sacraments, it is as if we receive the mercy of God in concentrated form and in a way that is designed to address personally in our lives the very things, the wounds and temptations, that you and I struggle with each and every day. The Sacraments don't merely produce the generic presence of Jesus; rather, it is Jesus who comes to us personally, aware of all

we are undergoing.

But there is something else I should say to you this morning and it's this. When I sit and pray in chapel or when I read the Scriptures, I am so often captivated by the wonderful things the Lord has done – whether it's the creation of the world in all its wonder, the dignity with which he endowed each us from the moment of conception, or the miracles, the signs and wonders, that Jesus performed while here on earth. All these are signs of the goodness and beauty of God. Yet, what amazes me even more, and I say this in a very personal way, is the forgiveness and patience that God shows to me, a sinner. My own capacity to forgive and my own patience is so limited; but God's capacity to love, to forgive, and to be patient is endless and infinite. This is not an invitation for me to presume on God's kindness by remaining in sin, but rather a loving invitation to enter into his rest, to absorb something of his love for me so that I can reflect it and share it in some way with those around me. And the more I strive to love those who do not love me and to forgive those who have in some way harmed me and ask the forgiveness of those whom I have harmed – the greater will be my capacity to receive the forgiveness of God which, in his love, he wants to lavish on me; I'll bet you feel the same way too.

The Test

So back to the wonderful parishioner who opened her soul to me so long ago. All that I have said to you this morning I was privileged to see in her soul. But I also told you that it was she who interprets this Gospel for me and how so? In her profound act of forgiveness, she taught me the test to which I must submit to see if I have really understood this Gospel and if I am really living it – and it's this: Think of the person or persons who have hurt us the most deeply; that person who robbed us of our loved ones and our dignity; cheated us out of our possessions; taken away our innocence – that person who has been our tormentor, that person who has humiliated us. Can we forgive that person? Can we forgive so as to be forgiven? Can we forgive so as to heal?

I think we can all agree that this is one of the toughest tests we could ever take. It doesn't mean that we condone what may have been done to us or to any other vulnerable person at any age or stage of life; nor still less does it mean that we

should enable destructive behaviors to continue. What it does mean is that in the grace of the Holy Spirit bequeathed upon us by Jesus through Word and Sacrament, we attain the freedom and strength to say to our enemy the very words we long to hear ourselves: "I have forgiven you."

Conclusion

Some years ago the late Francis Cardinal George of Chicago commented that we live in a society that permits everything and forgives nothing. And we have entered upon a bitterly divided, unforgiving era in our culture and sometimes in our Church. Yet, if we would be those spiritual persons whom St. Paul urges us to be in today's second reading, those persons who bear in our hearts the image of Jesus our heavenly Redeemer, then let us beg for the grace to be agents of mercy and forgiveness in our families, in our places of work, in the public square, and before our enemies. Then we will be light amid darkness, joy in the midst of sadness, hope amid despair. May God bless us and keep us always in his love!