

Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A

Sirach 27:30-28:7; Romans 14:7-9; and Matthew 18:21-35

At a time when I was a bit of a public figure, a group of people organized themselves against me. This included some people who had seemed to be friends of mine. It took me many years to get passed the hurts this group caused me, but I did. Every so often, however, I revisited the wounds, particularly those committed by my friends, and steeped myself in them. I was indignant that they had mistreated me – me! – and angry at their betrayal. I imagined what I might say or do if I ever met them again. I got my wish one day, over a decade later, when I was helping to host a diocesan mass for couples celebrating silver and golden wedding anniversaries. Up the steps of the cathedral came one of these frenemies on her husband's arm. She had an illness that left her helpless, without memory or intelligence. I was stunned to see her reduced from the vibrant, albeit scheming, person she had been. My heart was filled with pity and forgiveness. I suddenly saw her as more than a threat; I saw her as a complex person, whose complexity included vulnerability, whose power could disappear with the wind. I saw myself in her.

All three of our readings invite us to do just that, to see that, just as we need forgiveness, so do the people who have hurt us. What's more, we must hold this spiritual truth before us relentlessly. Jesus makes this point when Peter asks how often we should forgive. Peter thinks he is being generous by saying seven times. Keep in mind that, in the ancient Near East, seven stood for perfection. This perfection was not without an end, however. So, when Jesus says, "I say to you, not seven times but seventy times seven," he multiples perfection by perfection by ten, thus blowing the lid off any limitations.

"Argh!" we groan inwardly. As Sirach describes, we like to "hug tight" wrath and anger, "nourish anger against another" and "cherish wrath." Yes, our anger may have been initially justified; if the injustice is still happening, it remains justified. But, we must distinguish the other person from their sin. Bryan Stevenson, who works with prisoners on death row, states that every person is more than the worst thing they have done. Why is it we hug tight, nourish and cherish our anger? Ah, the devil is very clever! When we are justified in anger, the devil sneakily inflates our egos. We are too wonderful to be hurt by anyone! Yet Christ endured humiliation on the cross and it led to the redemption of the world. We are invited to walk the same way of humiliation. Can we remember all the things Sirach encourages us to remember – our last days, death and decay, the commandments and our covenant with God? Can we see our common humanity? You need forgiveness as much as I do. I need forgiveness as much as you do.

As we approach the 2020 election a polarized nation, as we seek only churches that match our view of Church, Romans has a clear message for us: more important than our opinions and practices is our dedication to the common purpose of living for God and for others. In ch. 14, Paul addresses rival factions we can recognize, conservatives and progressives, the scrupulous and the enlightened. Scholars have not been able to match historical groups to those Paul describes, but it all sounds so familiar. Again, as we hug our wrath, it is easy to be drawn, almost imperceptibly, into living and dying for ourselves: my way is THE right way. Paul reminds us that we live and die for the Lord; we are the Lord's. We live in community, both as the baptized and as human beings, and to love the Lord our God is to love our neighbor as ourselves. Christ freed us to live our purpose, which is not to win, crush, malign or separate ourselves from one another, but rather to serve. If our self-righteous behavior keeps the other person from understanding God, it is wrong. In vs. 15, Paul writes, "Do not destroy with your [religious practices] the one for whom Christ died." Yes, our anger and divisiveness is destroying one another!

The parable of the Unforgiving Servant paints a mural-sized vision of the hold vengeance takes of our hearts. The slave who is brought before the king owes the king 10,000 talents. (Imagine the national debt all owed by one person.) There is no way to pay back this debt, yet he is forgiven it. The other servant owes him a mere 100 denarii. (A day-laborer was paid a denari/day.) When he will not forgive this loan, he loses the king's mercy. He could not see himself in the other person. He was too busy hugging tight his anger. If only he could let go! If only we could as well!

- ❖ What anger are you hugging tight? Who is being hurt by this anger?
- ❖ When has focusing on service helped you with differing opinions?