

HOMILY for 24th SUNDAY in ORDINARY TIME – Year A

As I reflect on this Sunday's Gospel which discusses the issue of Forgiveness, I'm reminded of this cute story I'd like to share with you.

"Forgive your enemies" was the topic of the pastor's sermon on this particular Sunday morning. At the close of his rather long message, he asked how many were willing to forgive their enemies. About half of his congregation raised their hands.

Not satisfied, he preached for another twenty minutes & repeated the question. This time a few more lifted their hands. Still unsatisfied he lectured another fifteen minutes & repeated the question. Now all raised their hands except one elderly lady on the back row. "Ms. Jones, aren't you willing to forgive your enemies?" the pastor inquired.

"I don't have any" was her answer.

"Ms. Jones, that's very unusual. How old are you?"

"Ninety-three."

"Ms. Jones, please come down front & tell this congregation how a person can live ninety years & not have an enemy in the world."

The sweet little lady tottered down the aisle, very slowly turned around, & announced, "It's easy. I just outlived them all!"

That's another way of dealing with forgiveness! Anyway, if we look out the world these days, we'd see lots of hate & anger. People get mad at each other over all sorts of issues. Over the years, people have accumulated all kinds of religious, social, & political biases other than love to get them wound up against their neighbors. If we ask people what they hate or which group they don't like, they'd be able to tell us what it is without any hesitation. However, if we inquire people about what they like or which group they appreciate the most, it'd take them a long time to think about. My point is that our world is full of hate & anger, but very low in love & peace.

Of course, the Devil loves that atmosphere. It enjoys using leaders to stir up hate & anger & cause people to fight with one another. Our world would have less violence, shooting, & hate if everyone would promote peace & love instead of division & differences. Realizing how destructive anger & hate can be for our human family, today's First Reading has this message for us, "Wrath & anger are hateful things, yet sinner hugs them tight. But the vengeful will suffer the Lord's vengeance, for He remembers their sins in detail. Forgive your neighbor's injustice; then when you pray, your own sins will be forgiven. Could anyone nourish anger against another & expect healing from the Lord? ...Remember your last days, set enmity aside... & cease from sin!"

In our human history, we've seen all sorts of fights that have been caused by anger & hate. Billions of people have shed their blood & lost their lives because of that. In the Mid-East, for example, hateful messages & fighting has been going on for centuries. One generation after another has been taught to hate certain countries & blow up their enemies with suicide bombs indiscriminately. In our country alone, many feuds have erupted due to disputes & hate between two opposing parties. Perhaps the most infamous feud in the history of the United States is the Hatfield-McCoy conflict. The Hatfield's were from West Virginia & led by William Anderson Hatfield. Meanwhile, the McCoy's were from Kentucky & under leadership of Randolph McCoy. These two families got tangled up in all kinds of personal & political disputes

that escalated into a clan-wide war involving hundreds of participants. Between 1880 & 1891, the feud claimed more than a dozen members of the two families & became headline news around the country. As you can see, hate & anger can bring about great destruction personally & socially. Nothing good can come out of hate & anger. That's why the Church has focused intently on this topic & called on its faithful to get rid of those feelings. The Church has even set up a separate Sacrament of Reconciliation to help its faithful deal with that matter. With the help of that Sacrament, we can learn to reconcile & forgive one another every day. Without reconciliation & forgiveness, everyone would continue to hate & get angry with their neighbors over little things day after day.

Peter knew how important it is for him to learn about forgiveness & practice it faithfully in his daily life. Otherwise, he'd be stuck in the vicious circle of anger & hate like the rest of the world. So, he came to his Master & wanted to know the minimum number of times that he would have to forgive his brother or sister. He asked, "Lord, if my brother or sister sins against me, how often must I forgive? As many times as seven times?" In case you don't know the meaning of numbers in Scriptures & ancient tradition, number seven means total, wholesome, or a lot. Peter thought that by forgiving seven times he had done more than enough of his share in giving someone another chance. But, that was not enough forgiveness to someone as far as Jesus was concerned. Here's how Jesus responded, "I say to you, not seven times but seventy times seven times." In other words, Jesus wanted Peter & all of us to learn to forgive forever. That's certainly a tall order for all of his faithful disciples to follow.

That's why Jesus shared with us the story of a king & a servant who owed him a huge debt. The king decided to settle accounts with all his servants including the one who owed him a huge amount. The king ordered this servant to pay his debt, but was moved with pity by the begging of the servant. So, he let the servant go & wrote off his debt. This servant then met a fellow servant who owed him a mere fraction of what he himself owed. He seized him, throttled him, & put him in jail until he paid back what he owed. The king learned about this & said to that unmerciful servant, "You worthless wretch! I cancelled your entire debt when you pleaded with me. Should you not have dealt mercifully with your fellow servant, as I dealt with you?" Then in anger the King handed him over to torturers until he paid back all that he owed.

That's very sad, isn't it? Believe it or not, that servant with a huge debt is us. God has forgiven us for all of our debts & sin with the Cross of Jesus. But, like the servant in the Gospel story, we tend to judge & act unmercifully toward our fellowmen who might owe us just a fraction of our debt to God. Or, we don't want to forgive our neighbors at all. We mistreat them & mistakenly assume that we are god. However, the truth is far from that. We don't have the last words. Only God does! God will hold us accountable for everything we've done in this life. God will treat us on the Last Day exactly how we've treated one another here on earth. Unfortunately, only the wise would realize that. Only the wise would appreciate how God has forgiven them. Only the wise would act mercifully & treat their neighbors with understanding & care. Why? Because they don't want God to judge them harshly on the Last Day.

My dear brothers & sisters, forgiving someone who has done something wrong to us is not easy. But, today we're called to stop embracing hate & anger which will make it difficult for us to forgive. Instead, we should practice forgiving every day to help us be like Jesus & make our world a more loving & peaceful place.