

24<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A  
17<sup>th</sup> September 2016

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Forgiveness what does it mean to forgive? How many times should I forgive someone? These are the central themes of today's readings. Forgiveness is a virtue which is lacking in today's society. Our society is more comfortable with crime and punishment, more comfortable equating justice with revenge. Our media often declares that our judicial system has gone soft on crime; politicians often talk about the public's expectations of justice which often equates to long prison sentences. The problem is we often think of forgiveness as the removal of the consequences of our actions. Forgiveness is a two way action. It involves two people, the person who forgives and the person who accepts forgiveness. Both the giving and acceptance of forgiveness has consequences. We often think of forgiveness as a cop out. A cop out by someone who has not got the "courage" to extract retribution for the wrong committed against them. However the contrary is often true forgiveness frequently takes great courage and has powerful consequences. Peter Powell, a Uniting Church minister and psychologist, has worked with sex offenders for

more than 20 years asks his patients: “What happens after the party?” In working with sex offenders Powell uses the parable of the “Prodigal Son” where the father forgives the son and throws a party. After the party the son can either work for his father; work for his brother; or leave the farm. Powell’s point is the son can never return to life the way it was before he sold his half of the farm. The son is forgiven by his father but his actions have consequences which can’t be undone. Our actions have consequences, our forgiveness will have consequences, we have to learn to live with both.

In the first reading Sirach cautions against vengeance, vengeance is dynamically opposite to forgiveness. Unlike forgiveness, vengeance eats away at us like a spiritual acid, we spend time thinking how we will settle the score, and we lay awake thinking about a cutting phrase we will deliver to put them in their place. Forgiveness unlike vengeance has a transcendence healing quality which appears to carry with it a form of spiritual justice.

Cynthia Ngewu, mother of a young man slain during the apartheid era testified before the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission "This thing called

reconciliation...If I am understanding it correctly...it means the perpetrator, this man who killed my son, if it means he becomes human again, this man, so that I, so that all of us, get our humanity back...then I agree, then I support it all."

When forgiveness is offered, the gaze is not cast on the specifics of the deed. Forgiveness, while not disregarding the act, does not begin with the act, but with the person. The deed itself must be transcended, which is not to say it must be forgotten. An act of forgiveness is a response not to the deed, but to the doer of the deed. It does not deny the deed. Rather, forgiveness recognizes the deed - its impact having been lived, and continuing to be lived, by the victim's loved ones - and transcends the deed. People who come to the point of forgiveness have lived with and know pain<sup>1</sup>.

How many times must I forgive my brother? Peter's words echo to us across the ages, across many barbaric wars, across many heinous crimes? Jesus' reply is a challenging as it is short: As many times as necessary. And, Jesus' rationale is simple; how can we expect God

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<sup>1</sup> ON TRAUMA AND FORGIVENESS by Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela

to forgive humanity for all those barbaric wars and heinous crimes if we cannot forgive one another. In the parable of the unforgiving servant Jesus likens our debt to God to the servant who owes the King ten thousand talents. Now among the Hebrews a talent was the equivalent to one-hundred denarii. So the servant's debt to the king was ten thousand times greater than what his fellow servant owed him. Yet even though the king was capable of forgiving the servant this huge debt, the servant was unable to forgive his fellow servant a miniscule debt. It is easy for us to deceive ourselves that this does not apply me, I am not a criminal I have not committed some terrible act. We compare ourselves with others and say I'm not like them and delude ourselves into secretly thinking we are saints on earth. We ignore what we know in the depths of our hearts that we are sinners in need of forgiveness. We may not have robbed or murdered but we still need forgiveness.

The parable of the unforgiving servant is quite clear if we want and expect forgiveness we must be prepared to forgive. God's forgiveness of us is conditional on our forgiveness of others. If we reconcile ourselves with God through the Sacrament of Reconciliation but

refuse to reconcile ourselves with a family member who has wronged us then we have made a mockery of the Sacrament. God's forgiveness of us is unconditional so we are called to unconditional forgiveness of our neighbour.

Why is forgiveness so important? Because as Christians we are called to be Christlike, we are called to be like Christ in all things including forgiveness. In all his public life when Christ forgave someone He never exacted any retribution, He simply said go away and sin no more. I do not know about you but I have trouble with unconditional forgiveness. Like our media when I see someone on TV who is responsible for the death of a person get a two year sentence I feel our judicial system has let us down. But then I look at the person and remember there for the grace of God go I. In the words of Sirach if I extract vengeance then I will experience vengeance from a God who keeps a strict account of sin. The question I ask myself is in the finality of things will I be treated as a compassionate or unforgiving servant. To forgive is Christlike; to forgive; the choice is mine.