

7th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – C (February 20, 2022)

Let's just be upfront about this gospel—it's very hard, and it can seem impossible to live by. Listen again to Jesus' words, and I mean really listen attentively to what he said: "love your enemies...do good to those who hate you...pray for those who mistreat you...forgive and you will be forgiven" and all the rest. If we don't allow those words to simply go in one ear and out the other, we may well think: "Jesus, you can't possibly mean all that! If you knew what my family member did or said to me, if you knew how my ex-spouse or in-laws treated me and my family, if you knew...[whatever other injustice you have ever suffered], then you know I can't do all that love/bless/pray/forgive business!"

But of course, Jesus meant every single word of what he said. He wasn't using hyperbole as he sometimes did (e.g. "if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off")—no, he meant what he said as he always did. And we also have to recognize that he left us no wiggle room like "pray for those who mistreat you...unless they hurt you really badly". Jesus didn't say anything like that, no loopholes. You know that we lawyers (including we former lawyers...) are good at creating or finding loopholes. Well, Jesus offers us no such thing. I talked about this 'love your enemy' and 'forgiveness' business a few weeks ago; I won't repeat what I said then.

Rather, I want to share or remind you of the story of something that happened near Lancaster, Pennsylvania over fifteen years ago and how Jesus' most difficult teaching—the call to forgive—was lived out in perhaps the worst circumstances you could possibly imagine. In October of 2006, Charles Roberts, a 32-year-old husband and father of three, walked into a one-room Amish schoolhouse and shot ten children between the ages of six and thirteen--five of those children died. He then turned the gun on himself and took his own life. The mind reels at such a horrific evil, and it's impossible for us to imagine how we would react if such a thing happened to us. Roberts' parents suffered their own unimaginable pain as well, knowing that it was their son who did this...and who then took his own life.

Mere hours after the shootings, as the Amish parents waited for word on whether their children survived or not, an Amish man came to the Roberts' home to tell them that the grieving Amish families did not see them as enemies. Instead, they saw them as parents who grieved their death of their son—just as they grieved their death of their children. On the day of Charles Roberts' funeral, about 30 Amish men and women, some of whom were parents of Charles' shooting victims, came to the cemetery to support the Roberts family. Later on, the Roberts were invited to the funeral of one of the Amish girls who had been killed by their son.

This may seem to make no sense whatsoever; in fact, there were some who severely criticized the Amish for their words and gestures of forgiveness—thinking that trivialized the horror of what took place. But they trivialized nothing. They deeply and intensely grieved the mindless deaths of their children. One of the shooting victims actually survived her wounds but was seriously disabled by them. Her father sees every day what Roberts did to his daughter; he has to confront his understandable anger and struggle not to allow himself to be controlled by that anger. As one news story put it, 'every day, he has to forgive again.'

Forgiveness is hard. No one denies that, and Jesus never said it would be easy or trivial. Let's remember here: forgiveness does not mean forgetting, it does not mean pretending that the injustice doesn't hurt; it does not mean that you have to be best friends with the one who hurt you. But forgiveness does mean not wanting to stay stuck in the anger and bitterness. It does mean remembering that God wants eternal life and joy for the one who hurt you as much as he wants the same for you. Again, those Amish parents still grieve and struggle with anger over their children's injuries or deaths—of course they do! They are not heartless or emotionless people; they did not pretend that saying "I forgive you" made the hurt and the anger go away. But they chose to not only hear and remember Jesus' words...they chose to live out those words, and we are called to do the same.

One commentary on today's gospel put it this way: "Jesus understands the human heart that has been wounded by sin...the instinct for revenge surges up almost overwhelmingly. Nevertheless, he presents forgiveness not as an heroic act reserved for saints, but as the simply duty of every Christian." Every Christian: Amish, Catholic, and all others without exception—without loopholes. It is possible to make that choice, that decision to forgive. It has to be possible; Jesus wouldn't be calling us to forgive if it was impossible. It is possible, empowered by the grace of God, to make that decision and only by the grace of God. That grace is there for the asking, and it's up to us to ask, to pray for it. But Jesus won't force that grace on us against our will. We need to ask for it. We begin the process, the challenge to forgive by praying for the grace to do so. We can also begin to forgive by praying for the person(s) who have hurt us—praying for whatever grace of repentance or conversion they need as God sees that need.

So the next time you think that you can't possibly be expected to forgive that family member or ex-spouse or in-law or whoever else hurt you badly, remember first Jesus who prayed for forgiveness for those who crucified him. And remember those Amish parents and families who forgave and showed compassion for the family of the man who shot and killed or injured their own children. "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you...pray for those who mistreat you...forgive and you will be forgiven." Jesus indeed meant what he said. You can check his words for yourself, and you will have to conclude as I did: he left us no loopholes.