

24th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – A (September 17, 2023)

Have you ever wondered how many times you have done a certain task? Parents: how many meals do you think you have prepared for your children, or how many times did you change their diapers in their youngest years? If you ever got an actual total, you would likely be stunned, not to mention exhausted! Sometimes I get curious about how many times I've said Mass or how many confessions I've heard over 35+ years as a priest.

Another question along these lines: how many times over the course of your lives have you said the Lord's Prayer, the 'Our Father'? It is one of the first prayers we all learned as children, we pray it together at every Mass and many other prayers services, we say it a number of times whenever we pray the Rosary, and who know on how many other occasions. How many times—thousands of times? Tens of thousands of times? I really have no idea, but it's interesting to think about.

I ask this question because of this gospel we just heard. Every time we say the Our Father, however many thousands of times we may have said it over the course of our lives, we say “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Do you know what we are saying?? If we are harboring a grudge against someone, or holding on to a bitterness or anger against someone for what they did or said to us, if we dig in our heels and refuse to forgive that person, we are actually praying that our Father in heaven not forgive us! Our Catechism has a powerful reflection on this part of the Lord's Prayer, and it begins with the blunt statement: “This petition [prayer] is astonishing.” It sure is.

This gospel today is all about forgiveness and the consequences of a refusal to forgive. It starts with Peter asking Jesus how often he is supposed to forgive someone who wrongs him—'as many as seven times?' You almost get the sense that Peter thinks he is being really generous in offering a seven-fold forgiveness. But Jesus goes way beyond that and says—”I say seventy-seven times”; in other words, according to the meaning of that time, we are always to forgive. Then Jesus gives the parable about the servant who owed his master a huge amount of money that he had no way of repaying. He begged for patience, and the master, 'moved with compassion', forgave the entire loan. Then that same servant came across another servant who owed him a much smaller amount, demanded repayment, and refused to show any mercy whatsoever. In other words, that first servant refused to give a small gift after having just received a huge gift. Jesus made it clear that things didn't end up well for that servant, and concluded by saying that the same will happen to anyone who refuses to forgive from the heart.

Another scenario may help to further illustrate the point. Consider the case of a man who was unfaithful to his marriage vows. He confesses to his wife and asks forgiveness; for love of her husband, she receives him back into the home with total forgiveness. The next day at work, this same man is the target of a good-natured joke by a co-worker, but he takes great offense and refuses to have anything more to do with that co-worker. His wife forgave him for his serious sin of infidelity, but he refused to forgive a much lesser offense against himself.

I've spoken before about the challenge and the need of forgiveness, and I'm in really good company in doing so—because Jesus spoke about this a lot. Immediately after giving us the Lord's Prayer in the Sermon on the Mount, he then said “If you forgive the faults of others, your heavenly Father will forgive you yours. If you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive you. (Matt. 6:14-15)” We hear the same thing in Luke's gospel; Jesus was very clear on need to forgive—it's not one option among others.

Let's remember some basics about forgiveness. First, it does not mean forgetting or pretending that a hurt or injury did not take place. Jesus never said "forgive and forget"; rather, he said 'forgive'. In fact, it may be necessary for a solemn remembrance of certain injuries on a small or large scale to help make sure that such offenses do not happen again. Nor do we have to wait until we feel like forgiving before we decide to forgive. That feeling may take a long time to develop—if it ever does develop. Rather, forgiveness is a decision we make. We choose not to stay stuck in or be enslaved by feelings of anger, bitterness, or revenge that accomplish nothing good or helpful at all.

Is forgiveness difficult? It sure can be, especially if the hurt was deeply and intentionally inflicted. That's where prayer has to come in to play—we pray for the desire and the grace to forgive. Jesus commands us to forgive, and he never asks the impossible from us. But we need his grace and strength to do so—he will give it to us if we simply and sincerely ask.

Every single one of us has been blessed and forgiven by God and redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ—we have all received that gift of infinite value. Do we respond to that gift of mercy by being merciful to those who have hurt us? Remember those thousands or tens of thousands of times we have prayed "...forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us". If we want to be forgiven by God, we will want to choose to forgive and to pray for those who have hurt us. We can do so by and with the grace of God that he will shower upon us if we ask. And as Jesus made unmistakably and astonishingly clear, our receiving God's forgiveness is directly connected to our willingness to forgive others. Let's remember that the next time we pray the "Our Father"...and every other time as well.