

Grace and peace to you my friends and fellow sojourners from Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

This homily today is actually the result of me doing something Tuesday that I have not done in the three years I was in seminary and my almost five years of ordained ministry. I chose **not** to use the liturgically assigned texts for today. In this homily I am also going to quote some scriptures **out** of their full context which is something I seldom do because I do not like to do so.

Last week I talked about being shell shocked by all that happened last week but the weekend and Monday were not any better and may have actually been worse for Cate and I in the office with most of the negativity falling on Cate's shoulders. I got up on Tuesday morning and went out for my normal Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday two mile or so walk. About a quarter of a mile into the walk certain words in a verse in the Bible exploded in my head and I spent the rest of the walk thinking about that verse and how I could use it for the basis of a homily. When I got to the office, I immediately asked Cate how much of an issue it would be if I changed at least the gospel reading and possibly all of the readings. She bravely said, "no big deal", so I went to do my scripture research. I actually found exactly what I was looking for in an upcoming Sunday but beyond the time frame I was interested in. This led to some music concerns but in the end; Beth, Cate, and Zel were all willing to go along with the change I envisioned. All that being said, I am **now** going to start the main part of the homily with a brief look and comment on each of the first three readings followed by a more detailed look at just a small portion of the gospel reading.

Our reading from Genesis today, not to mention many preceding chapters as well, is not a particularly good example of family harmony. After all that has been said and done, Joseph's brothers **still** are not trustful of Joseph. They still fear his retribution and Joseph once again tries reassuring them by saying: "**Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as God is doing today. So have no fear.**" This my friends is complete forgiveness.

In our psalm today we hear these words: "**LORD, you are full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love; ⁹you will not always accuse us, nor will you keep your anger forever.**" Do these words sound familiar? They should because they occur many times in the Psalter **and** in the prophetic books. They are, in fact, a **restatement** of God's self-descriptive words to Moses in Exodus 34:6.

Then in our reading from Romans we hear Paul say: "**Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.**" I am sure you have heard the cliché that we are all in the same boat. Recently I saw this rewritten to say that we are not all in the same boat. We are all in the same storm but some have yachts, and some have row boats, and some have no boat at all. That is why Jesus said how important it is for us to care for each other. Audrey West in her

commentary had a neat little phrase about our Romans reading. She said: "It is tough to praise God if you are busy passing judgement on other people."

I am pretty sure by now that you all are getting the idea that this homily has something to do with forgiveness. I am pretty sure most of you know that I do not ever title my homilies but if I were to title this homily it would be something like: "Forgiving is Forgetting." Have you ever seen the Facebook meme that says: "I forgive you but I will not forget"? For the record, that is **not** God's forgiveness and that is not the kind of forgiveness God **expects** from us. Now I must admit that this is God once again being counter culture.

I want to focus now on just the first two verses of our gospel reading. These verses are followed in the rest of our reading today by a somewhat confusing but explanatory parable by Jesus. For the record, these are exactly the verses that came to my mind on Tuesday morning. They read: "**Peter came and said to [Jesus], 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy times seven times.'**" I must admit that I have often wondered where Peter's seven came from, was it simply an Israelite convention? I discovered in my study that the Jewish rabbis at the time taught that forgiving someone more than three times was unnecessary – citing in Amos where God forgave Israel's enemies three times, then punished them. It seems Peter was attempting to even appear benevolent by offering a number more than twice the identified number at the time.

Of course Jesus is having none of that. Jesus comes back with a number that is simply mind-boggling. The disciples were still thinking in the limited terms of the law, rather in the unlimited terms of grace. Jesus is clearly saying forgiveness is not to be meted out in a limited fashion but is to be abundant, overflowing, and available to all, just as the **measureless** grace of God is poured out upon us. For those of us near or over seventy, I think of Jesus' number in terms of CRS disease, you know, cannot remember stuff. I suspect that most of us will **lose** count long before we get to that number.

I believe it is important for us to remember also that forgiveness is never about the one being forgiven but rather it is about the one doing the forgiving. Simply said, forgiveness gives to the forgiver relief. I was recently reminded of a twenty plus year forgiveness issue in my life when I saw someone in a Purdue shirt. No, it is not about Big 10 football. My boss at the time did everything but promise me a promotion to a particular job. She was giving me the opportunity to do some assisting in that position and she told me some college courses to take that would improve my qualifications. In the end her boss had a personnel issue that **he** wanted to resolve by me being aced out of this promotion. The new guy, Bob, was a graduate of Purdue and we were like oil and water for many, many years, most often when he interfered with me doing my job or him even trying to tell **me** how to do my job. This was roughly ten years or so before I retired from the district and I remember telling my boss one time that if Bob ever does one particular thing to me again, I will take him out behind the warehouse and educate him. Later, after I spent five years as the union president we did become semi-cordial with each other. However, I **realized** when I saw that

Purdue shirt and my hackles were aroused that I still have some work to do in this area of forgiveness in my life.

Do you have work to do on forgiveness in your life? I know it is not easy but I also know that it is an expectation. And then there is the truth of being sinners and saints, we may never be able to forgive and forget some things but I must encourage you to try – for you, for God.

Hear then the good news:

I do not think Jesus actually wants Peter to increase his forgiveness quota.

I think Jesus wants Peter to stop **counting** altogether.

Forgiveness, like love, is inherently and intimately relational rather than legal and therefore cannot be quantified.

Forgiveness is, however, one of the most difficult of human acts, not only to give but also to receive.

In some ways, I think forgiveness is a theological necessity.

It is an expectation to come out of our faith, our love and service to God and to others.

David Lose suggests that forgiveness is **ultimately** a decision about the past.

A decision to accept both that we **cannot** change the past and also that the past does not have to **hold** our future captive.

Paul says it this way in Philippians 3: 13 and 14: "**No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it, but I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.**"

As always, a quote today from Chad Bird "*In forgiveness we lose the control we thought we had, because there is no controlling the unrelenting, radical grace of a forgiveness-crazy God. This love is **frightening** to the careful, **reprehensible** to the legalist, **dangerous** to the moralist. But if you've experienced it, you know it's like being yanked out of the grave and having your coffin lid pried open. It is the most unexpected pleasure in the world to be loved without condition by a God who makes no demands.*"

Lest I forget, let me remind you that whatever compassion and forgiveness we have is a gift from God and whatever lack of compassion and forgiveness we have is covered entirely and **even erased** by God's merciful grace.

Grace and peace to you, my friends, from the God who has immeasurable grace, love, and mercy for us sinners, God's heirs to the kingdom.

Amen