

## ***Forgiveness***

Homily for the Twenty Third Sunday of Ordinary Time, Cycle A

*Ezequiel 33:7-9; Romans 13:8-10; Matthew 18:15-20*

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"Amen, I say to you," Jesus tells his disciples in today's Gospel, "whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

Traditionally, as Catholics we understand this "loosening" and "binding" as a reference to the power of the priest acting in the person of Christ to impart or retain absolution for the forgiveness of sins.



The actual words of the priest are, "God, the Father of mercies, through the death and resurrection of his Son has reconciled the world to himself and sent the Holy Spirit among us for the forgiveness of sins; through the ministry of the Church may God give you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, + and of the Holy Spirit."

The precise wording is noteworthy. The absolution blessing begins with God. God is the author of all forgiveness. Through his Son, Jesus Christ, he has already reconciled the world to His mercy. He sent the Holy Spirit so we may experience the forgiveness of our sins. Thus, the priest forgives our sins precisely because he is not acting in his own "person" but in the person of Jesus Christ. Forgiveness stems, not from human power, but the power of Christ to save.

I never tire of underscoring this reality with the story of my first funeral as a bishop. It was for a young man who was shot to death. It was at a party. A fight broke. Tempers were fueled by alcohol. Someone had a gun. Suddenly a young man I prepared for confirmation several years earlier was dead.

The night before the funeral, many young friends gathered in our church parking lot. They had T-Shirts emblazoned with a picture of their young friend who had been shot. Some were sad. Some were angry. Some wanted revenge.

The next day at the funeral during the homily I sternly challenged the youth: "No revenge!" But it was the father of young man who had the biggest impact. In his broken English he told everyone that he forgave the killer of his son. He went on to tell us he expected us to do the same. He did not ask. He commanded us to do as he did and forgive from our hearts the youth who had shot his son to death.

Can you do that? If you and I are really honest with ourselves, most likely the answer will be "no." It is not easy to let go of revenge. It is not easy to forgive when we have been hurt. But this is why the blessing prayer of absolution begins with the phrase, "God the Father of mercies..." Terrible things can happen to us. We see terrible injustices against our friends, our family and our co-workers. There are things that seem so unfair, so unjust, and so hurtful it is beyond our psychological power to forgive. Often the wounds and pain are so deep and profound, humanly speaking, we cannot forgive on our own psychological and emotional power. We need help. We need God's help. We need the "Father of Mercies."

Note that this Gospel from St. Matthew begins with Jesus addressing how to handle conflict. The direction is quite clear. Go first to the brother who has sinned against you. If that does not work, bring two others. If that does not work, call upon the elders of the church.

The command of Jesus does not allow us to engage in gossip. It does not allow us to go around and tell everyone around us how we have been harmed. No. We go directly to the person. Then we can ask two others we trust. Then we can seek the help of the church. The point cannot be clearer. Even when other harm us, we cannot spread rumors and gossip about them. We cannot engage in revenge with our words. First and foremost, we must go directly to the person who we think has harmed us. We must respect that person and talk directly to them even when that person has harmed us.

"Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us." We pray these words every day in the "Our Father." "This petition is astonishing," notes the Catechism of the Catholic Church (2838), because "...our petition will not be heard unless we have first met a strict requirement." That requirement is that our forgiveness comes first. If we want to be forgiven then we must forgive first. Our forgiveness comes first.

Today's Gospel gives us the chance to review our lives. How do we handle conflict? When I am harmed, do I go directly to the other person? Or do I sometimes gossip? Can I forgive? When I am too hurt, do I trust God to forgive even when I cannot?

This is why we seek forgiveness. This is why we confess our sins aloud to a priest. This is why we seek the help of God and His Church to free us from sin. This is why we trust the power of forgiveness articulated by Jesus in today's Gospel from St. Matthew when he tells his disciples: "Amen, I say to you...whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

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