

## 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time

A priest tried in vain to find a parking spot. He stuck this note under the windshield wiper, “*I’ve circled the block for 15 minutes. If I don’t park here, I’ll miss a very important appointment. Forgive us our trespasses.*” On returning, he found this note pinned to a parking ticket. “*I’ve circled the block for 15 years. If I don’t give you a ticket, I could be fired. Lead us not into temptation.*” What is the most common sin of today? I think the most common sin of today is refusal to forgive. The Scripture speaks of the need to forgive 108 times. We have to be grateful to Peter for asking the question, “Lord, how many times should I forgive? Seven times?” Peter thought that Jesus would complement him for saying seven times. But Jesus says, “Seventy times seven,” which means an unlimited number of times.

When Abraham Lincoln was running for office, there was one man, Mr. Stanton, who opposed him “tooth and nail,” and he went all over the country speaking very unkind things about Mr. Lincoln. However, when he became the president, Lincoln made him the Secretary of War. Everyone was shocked and thought that the President had gone crazy to elevate his enemy to a high rank in his government. By doing that, he had won over an enemy. He became his closest aid. Mr. Stanton paid the greatest tribute to Lincoln when he died. If Abraham Lincoln had hated Stanton, and acted accordingly, he would not have transformed and redeemed him. Stanton would have gone to his grave hating Lincoln, and Lincoln would have gone to his grave hating Stanton. But through the power of forgiving love, Abraham Lincoln was able to redeem Stanton.

Why do we find it hard to forgive others even though that is the only way to anchor God's forgiveness? I think the reason is because we fail to appreciate and celebrate our own forgiveness. Like the ungrateful servant in the parable, we focus on the 100 denarii our neighbor owes us rather than the 10,000 talents we owe to God, which God has graciously cancelled. This is symbolic of what we owe to God—a huge debt we can never, ever hope to repay God, even if we spent our whole life in sackcloth and ashes. But God in his infinite mercy has forgiven us. The only thing he asks us in return is to realize that, and forgive our brothers and sisters in turn.

In 1981 there was an attempt made on the life of Pope John Paul II. After recovering, he shocked the world when he visited the prison to meet Mehmet Ali Ağca who had tried to assassinate him. The Pope sat in his prison cell and talked to him for about 20 minutes. He had gone to tell him that he had forgiven him. The headline the next week in *Time Magazine* was, “Why forgive?” That is a good question—one that has been asked for centuries. Today’s readings give us the reason. “Could anyone nourish anger against another and expect healing from the Lord?” asks Sirach in the first reading. In the same way, in the context of the gospel we can ask, “Can anyone expect God to forgive us when we fail to forgive our brothers and sisters?” We can expect forgiveness and healing from God, only if *we* are able to forgive. Very often, we are not called to forgive monstrous offences like that of Pope John Paul II, but small hurts and irritations. Holding grudges and anger are all part of our unwillingness to forgive. It is hard sometimes. So we have to pray for God’s grace to have the ability to forgive.

It was Mahatma Gandhi who said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth will make the world blind and toothless." Lack of forgiveness is the root cause of all evils from the time of Cain and Abel. The readings of today challenge us to forgive fully, freely and from the bottom of our hearts. True forgiveness removes the poison from our heads, heals the wounds of our hearts and sets our souls in peace. We gather around this altar to the sacrifice of Christ, who gave up His life forgiving his enemies. Let us ask Him for the grace to forgive.