

Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy

FORGIVING INJURIES

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9th in a series— Diocese of Gaylord



Growing up in a family with nine siblings had its fair share of joy and harmony as well as its share of injury and suffering. Many times as we played together, ate together, worked together etc., there would be laughter and harmony as well as shouting and tears. Whenever I would talk, or sometimes cry, to my mom about an injury received, she would always bring us together and make us apologize to one another. Sometimes this came after much deserved discipline. Later on, when I would bring her my problems from school and sports and tell her about what someone had done to me, I would always receive the same answer. “You have to forgive them.” I would always complain, “But mom!” “No!, you just have to forgive them. Just do it.” Honestly this response at the time never felt good, and I never wanted to “just do it.” It just didn’t seem fair. I was looking for something a little more like “How could anyone treat you that way, let’s go call their parents and let them have it.” Nope, that never came. Looking back at those days now, I’m thankful that she taught me that, because I have learned from it how important forgiveness is not only for peace between the one offended and the offender, but also for my own peace of soul and freedom of heart. With that in mind I would like to meditate upon the spiritual work of mercy, forgiving injuries.

Throughout his pontificate so far, Pope Francis has returned over and over again to the theme of mercy in action. I believe we tend to think more of the corporal works of mercy, like feeding the hungry and clothing the naked and so on. But we cannot forget that the spiritual works of mercy are also “works” of mercy. As I think we all know, forgiving injuries done to us is extremely hard work, sometimes seeming impossible. We would much rather get even, “an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth,” right? The problem with that is that usually when we try to exact justice, we want more like two eyes for one eye, because of our anger and perhaps even hatred that blinds us. Things, as we know, can escalate quite quickly, which is why we take the time to develop merciful and forgiving hearts.

Over and over again in the Gospels Jesus asks us to forgive and to have mercy on our neighbors. On our ability to do so depends our receiving of God’s mercy. I’m reminded of the passage from Matthew 6:12-15, where Jesus in teaching his followers how to pray, tells them to say “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Of the seven petitions that we find in the Our Father, this is the only one that comes with a condition. And knowing how difficult this is for us to do, immediately following the prayer, Jesus qualifies that particular statement by adding in verses 14 and 15, “For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

This also makes me think of the story of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18:23-35. Here the servant begs his master to give him mercy and time and then promises to pay back an impossibly large debt. The master does have pity on him and forgives the whole debt, just like God does for us. The servant immediately leaves and finds another servant who owes him much much less and begins to choke him and demand payment. The other servant makes the same plea for mercy and time to pay back the money, but the first servant refuses and has his fellow servant thrown in jail. As expected the master finds out and brings this terrible servant to justice for not following his example of forgiveness.

What these, and many other passages tell us, is that God our loving Father offers us mercy, forgiveness and love leading to eternal life, but these gifts are only able to be received by those who allow their hearts to be transformed and healed by them to the point where they can go and do the same towards others. By living this way we ourselves receive a great gift, a gift that getting even can never give, and that is peace.

Having counseled many toward forgiveness, I have found that some struggle to do so thinking that forgiving somehow makes the offense okay. This is not the case. When we forgive, we are giving up the right of exacting justice for the wrong committed while at the same time giving the offender a new start and chance to do better. But, what if they don't change their ways? For this we still need to forgive. God's forgiveness is always available to us even though we might not open our hearts to its transforming power. This means that we forgive and allow God to be the judge. St. Paul reminds us this in Romans 12:19 when he says "Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay," says the Lord. And even though this truly is the case, that God will repay, he wills that all of us be saved and so prays from the cross, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).

St. Philip Neri, when speaking on those having difficulty with forgiveness had this to say, "If a man finds it very hard to forgive injuries, let him look at a Crucifix, and think that Christ shed all His Blood for him, and not only forgave His enemies, but even prayed His Heavenly Father to forgive them also. Let him remember that when he says the Pater Noster (Our Father), every day, instead of asking pardon for his sins, he is calling down vengeance on himself."

To say the least, forgiveness is really hard work. It cost Jesus his life. He willed it so, though we are undeserving and often ungrateful. Yet he calls us to follow after him and carry our own crosses, forgiving others and loving other, just as he did. What we know and what gives us hope is that he promises that his grace will be sufficient for us. He will give us the strength we need and the peace our hearts long for. So the challenge for us all is to forgive readily the injuries we receive, and strive with His grace to take on His heart of mercy, then giving freely and willingly to those who have injured us.