

Sunday, September 13, 2020

24th Sunday of Ordinary Time

Meditation and Questions for Reflection or Group Discussion

Mass Readings:

1st Reading: Sirach 27:30–28:7

2nd Reading: Romans 14:7-9

Responsorial: Psalm 103:1-4, 9-12

Gospel: Matthew 18:21-35

Forgiving Others, as God has Forgiven You

Wrath and anger are hateful things, yet the sinner hugs them tight. (Sirach 27:30)

Grudges. We've all carried them. At some point, each of us has been hurt by a friend, family member, or coworker. We can feel wounded and hold onto our anger, to the point where it defines us as a victim. But our first reading tells us this is not a healthy response.

When Sirach wrote these words two thousand years ago, he was clued into something that modern psychologists are only now coming to understand. Withholding forgiveness affects our physical and mental health. It can elevate our blood pressure, disrupt our sleep, and weaken our immune system. It can decrease our ability to trust people and reinforce a negative mindset about life. Why would we "hug tight" to these things that harm us? Only forgiveness can help us loosen our grip.

When we choose to forgive, even if the offender doesn't ask for forgiveness, we stop being that "wronged person." We overcome the stress and bitterness and negativity that were wrapped around us. Best of all, we open ourselves up to the Lord's healing.

God knows everything we've gone through: the ways we've been hurt and the ways we've hurt the people around us. He forgives us, like the master in today's Gospel. If we can let God's forgiveness soften our hearts and break through our guilt, shame, and sadness over the hurts we have caused, we will find the grace to act the same toward the people who have hurt us.

If you're struggling with a grudge or offense, bring it to God in prayer. Ask him to help you release your hold on anger, even if you feel justified. Forgive the person who hurt you even if you can't physically reconcile with them. Let the act of forgiveness bring you peace and help you move on.

"Father, help me to let go of wrath and anger. I don't want to refuse mercy to anyone. Teach me how to forgive!"

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Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

1. The first reading contains these words: *Wrath and anger are hateful things, yet the sinner hugs them tight. The vengeful will suffer the LORD's vengeance, for he remembers their sins in detail. Forgive your neighbor's injustice; then when you pray, your own sins will be forgiven. Could anyone nourish anger against another and expect healing from the LORD? Could anyone refuse mercy to another like himself, can he seek pardon for his own sins? If one who is but flesh cherishes wrath, who will forgive his sins? Remember your last days, set enmity aside; remember death and decay, and cease from sin!*
 - How would you describe the message being conveyed by the first reading?
 - Why do you think the consequences of holding onto anger and not forgiving others are so severe?
 - Why do you believe the first reading also encourages us to remember our *last days* when it comes to letting go of unforgiveness, anger, and vengeance toward others? How are you doing in *setting enmity aside*?
2. The responsorial psalm speaks of the Lord's great mercy, kindness, and compassion towards us: *He pardons all your iniquities, heals all your ills. He redeems your life from destruction, crowns you with kindness and compassion. He will not always chide, nor does he keep his wrath forever. Not according to our sins does he deal with us, nor does he requite us according to our crimes. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so surpassing is his kindness toward those who fear him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has he put our transgressions from us.*
 - In what ways are the description of the Lord's *kindness and compassion* toward us in the responsorial psalm related to the severe warnings against unforgiveness and anger toward others in the first reading?
 - How does knowing *The Lord is kind and merciful, slow to anger, and rich in compassion* impact the way you treat others? Are there people in your life to whom you can provide healing and pardoning?
3. In the second reading, St. Paul speaks these words to us: *None of us lives for oneself, and no one dies for oneself. For if we live, we live for the Lord, and if we die, we die for the Lord; so then, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. For this is why Christ died and came to life, that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.*
 - What is your understanding of the meaning of these words? How do they apply to your life?
 - What steps can you take to make them a greater reality in your life?
 - In what way is this reading related to the priorities that control our lives?
4. The Gospel reading tells the familiar parable of the king who forgives his servant of the *huge amount* he owed him, but the servant then refuses to forgive *one of his fellow servants who owed him a much smaller amount*. When the king finds out, serious words and actions follow: *His master summoned him and said to him, "You wicked servant! I forgave you your entire debt because you begged me to. Should you not have had pity on your fellow servant, as I had pity on you?" Then in anger his master handed him over to the torturers until he should pay back the whole debt.* The Gospel reading ends with these challenging words of warning to us: *So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives your brother from your heart.*
 - Why do you think Jesus told two contrasting description of how we are to forgive others?
 - Why was the servant called a *wicked servant* when the king found out how he treated *his fellow servant*?
 - Jesus' parable tells us that we will be forgiven to the same extent we forgive others. We can't just ask for mercy for ourselves from the Lord, yet demand justice for others. How does this reality impact the way you live?
5. The meditation is a reflection on the Gospel reading and includes these words: "Withholding forgiveness affects our physical and mental health. It can elevate our blood pressure, disrupt our sleep, and weaken our immune system. It can decrease our ability to trust people and reinforce a negative mindset about life. Why would we 'hug tight' to these things that harm us? Only forgiveness can help us loosen our grip. We overcome the stress and bitterness and negativity that were wrapped around us. Best of all, we open ourselves up to the Lord's healing."
 - How does the meditation describe the impact of not forgiving others as God has forgiven you?
 - What steps can you take to better emulate God's forgiveness and become more forgiving as well?
 - Are there people in your life that you have a hard time forgiving? Are there others who you haven't forgiven because "the offender doesn't ask for forgiveness"? What do you think God desires of you?

Take some time now to pray and thank the Lord for his forgiveness and mercy toward you and toward others, and ask him to give you the grace to be more forgiving and merciful. Use the prayer below from the end of the meditation as the starting point.

"Father, help me to let go of wrath and anger. I don't want to refuse mercy to anyone. Teach me how to forgive!"

[Maurice Blumberg is currently a member of the board of directors of the ChristLife Catholic Ministry for Evangelization (www.christlife.org), a member of the National Service Committee Council of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal (www.nsc-chariscenr.org), and a board member of The Love of Christ Foundation. Prior to this, Maurice was the founding executive director of the National Fellowship of Catholic Men, a chairman of the board of *The Word Among Us* (www.wau.org), and a director of partner relations for The Word Among Us Partners ministry. He is also a current leader of his parish ChristLife, Healing, and Men's Ministries. He can be contacted at mblumberg@aol.com.]