

## "Keys to Forgiveness"

Homily of September 15, 2002 (on Matthew 18: 21-35)

by Fr. Brian Joyce

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Jesus says we should forgive each other seventy times seven. I have my calculator. It's right here, and let me check that out..... Seven times seventy.... Yeah!... Four hundred ninety times. I'm keeping track. I want everybody to know that I take the words of Jesus seriously. And I take people who offend me even more seriously. I'm keeping track. I have a couple of guys who are already over four hundred. They are at four thirty-two and four seventy-six. And I'm keeping track.

I am glad that you are laughing because the teaching of Jesus is the exact opposite. Jesus tells us, "Don't keep track." Jesus says, "Don't hold anger and resentment in your heart." Jesus says, "Don't look for vengeance and payback." Instead he says, "Treat one another the way God treats you." Be forgiving the way our generous God is forgiving to us. In fact, in many ways, forgiveness is the signature and ID of those people who try to follow Jesus. But it is very, very hard to live out. How do you live out forgiveness around 9/11, and Osama binLaden? How do you live out forgiveness around Iraq and Saddam Hussein? How do you live out forgiveness around innocent victims of murder, perhaps if they are in your own family, as we have in our parish. How do you live out forgiveness around sexual abuse of minors by trusted clergy, with victims not listened to and with Church leaders not acting responsibly? How do you live out forgiveness around priest abuse, clergy being falsely accused with no due process and with trial by press and media?

I will tell you something much harder. (Those are the easy ones.) It is much, much harder to deal with forgiveness that is up close and personal. It's not dealing with foreign policy, or with major national tragedies, or with headline-worthy offenses, but rather dealing with the hurts and wrongs inflicted on us by those close to us, by friends, by family members, by partners, by co-workers who we're in daily contact with. How do you live out forgiveness there?

A year ago last March, I put together what I call the "Ten Commandments of Forgiveness." And I thought this would be a good weekend, with this gospel, to re-visit those commandments. I will print them next week in the bulletin again so you can have them. But I suggest we look at those ten commands of forgiveness again, this time asking which are the ones most difficult for us. Which do I find most difficult to live with and to accept? I think the first five may be very hard to live with. But I think, at least up here in our heads, we accept them. I think. Here are the first five:

#1. Forgiveness is not easy. It takes time and it takes effort.

#2. Forgiveness is not forgetting. It doesn't mean a change in memory. It means a change in heart.

#3. Forgiveness does not overlook evil. In other words, it is not avoidance. It is not denial.

#4. Forgiveness is not destructive. It doesn't mean that we let hurt and damage continue and go on.

#5. Forgiveness is not the same thing as approval. In fact, the reason that we need forgiveness is that we don't approve. Something has happened that we do not approve of. We will not approve of it. What we can do is forgive.

Now, that's the first five. But then I think it gets more difficult. Think of these next five. Which of those do you not only have trouble living with, but which one would you say, for you, you are not even sure you can accept?

#6. Forgiveness is based on recognizing and admitting that people are always bigger than their faults. In other words, I shouldn't define people by just the way they have treated me. There is more to their lives than that.

#7. Forgiveness is willing to allow a person who has offended me to start over again. Or, do I say, "No room! No second chances! No, I will not ever let go and let you begin again."

#8. Forgiveness recognizes the humanity of the person who has wronged us and also recognizes our own humanity and our own shortcomings and our own contribution to what went wrong.

#9. Forgiveness surrenders the right to "get even." And, finally,

#10. Forgiveness means we wish the person or the group that has hurt us well. In fact, we wish them the best.

Pretty tough stuff! Pretty hard to live up to. And Jesus says the foundation for it, the motivation, the energy that allows it to happen, the ground that founds and fuels our forgiveness is trying to treat others the way God treats us. The very nature of our God is to forgive. Our God, Who is at the heart of the Universe, lets go and forgives. Our God, Who is the ground of our personal lives, lets go and forgives. Our God, Who is the standard of living rightly and living well, lets go and forgives. Our God is the foundation and the reason for us to offer forgiveness. But it is still very hard.

I am going to recommend two keys to forgiveness: Compassion and Humor. We can begin to forgive if we begin to understand another's choices and behavior, at least a little bit. And compassion makes that possible. Compassion is not feeling sorry for somebody. It is feeling along with somebody. If we can just for a moment, just for a moment, glimpse things through their eyes.... if we can just for a moment hurt with something of their feelings.... if we can just for a moment walk in their shoes.... or, if we can just for a moment, look at the world or the incident that happened from their confused, complicated and slightly distorted viewpoint, instead of looking at it from our confused, complicated, and slightly distorted viewpoint, then we can begin. Compassion is the first key.

The second key is close to the first. It is humor. You know, it is interesting. I have often said that humor is the other side of faith. Even in our language, it shows up. We talk about jokes and we talk about belief, and we say the same things. We say to somebody about our belief or about our creed, or about a joke that we told, "Don't you get it?.... Do you get it?" We use that kind of language. They are so close. It's hard to imagine a humorless believer. I can imagine a well-behaved rule-keeper, but not a believer, who has no humor.

Humor is the other side of forgiveness too. And our language shows that up, because we say to somebody who doesn't have a sense of humor or somebody who is angry and won't let go with forgiveness, we say to both of them, "Will you please lighten up?" ....We say to both of them, "Will you please lighten up?" It's hard to imagine somebody who is good-humored about life and miserly about forgiveness. Forgiveness is very close to humor. One of the reasons is, with both of them, we see the bad, what's out of kilter, but we also see the good and are able to smile. That's why there are all these good news/bad news jokes. "I know things are wrong between us, but let's look at it this way."

Rodney Dangerfield reports he went to his doctor and he said, "Doctor, there is something the matter with me. Every time I look in the mirror, I get a stomach ache and I want to throw up." And his doctor replied, "Look at it this way. Your eyesight is perfect."

A Cambridge professor recently wrote a book which many critics have described as the best current book on the Jewish Holocaust. And it is, of all things, a biography of the comedian, Woodie Allen. In referring to the Jewish Holocaust, he writes, "After the death camps, there are at least six million reasons not to laugh any more, and at least six million reasons to try and laugh again."

No pit is so deep that our God is not deeper still. No forgiveness is so difficult that our God is not there first. And no wound is so bad that our God does not invite us to healing

from within. Compassion, humor, faith, forgiveness, and justice.... God help us!....  
Actually, God will help us. Amen