

**Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A
(Sept. 11, 2005)**

Forgive Us As We Forgive Others

The obvious theme of our readings today is forgiveness. I would like to tell you a very touching story of forgiveness. And it's a true story.

The year is 1983. And very fittingly it happened during the Christmas season. A photograph flashed around the world and appeared in major newspapers as well as on the cover of *Time* magazine. In the photograph we see a prison cell. Two men are there, one clad in a long white robe, the other in a dark blue shirt and trousers. Their heads are close together as they talk and they are clasping each other's hands. As they finish they rise and embrace each other. The man in the long white robe is, of course, Pope John Paul II and the other is Mehmet Ali Agha who had tried to kill him. When he came out of the prison cell the Pope was confronted by representatives of the world's media and they asked him what they had discussed. The only reply the Pope made was to say, "He is my brother. I forgive him." A beautiful, touching example of what we are hearing in our readings today.

There seems to be an idea around in some Christian circles that forgiveness was not part of the Jewish tradition before the time of Jesus. But our first reading from the Book of Sirach proves that this notion is false. Coincidentally the author's name is Jesus, Jesus Ben Sirach, and he says, "Forgive your neighbor's injustice, then when you pray your own sins will be forgiven." Jesus of Nazareth in the Gospels teaches us to pray, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." It's not always an easy thing to do. In fact it can be very difficult. I think Jesus realized this. That's one reason why he emphasized it so much and gave us the supreme example from the cross, "Father forgive them, they don't know what they are doing."

Our Gospel passage today follows immediately on the one we heard last week when Jesus tells us to be reconciled to anyone who has offended us. Peter, no doubt thinking he was being very generous, asks Jesus if it is sufficient to forgive someone seven times a day. Imagine his astonishment

when Jesus replies, “Not seven times, but seventy-seven times.” What he means, of course, is that there is to be no limit to forgiveness. Then he tells that very vivid and forceful story about the servant whose master forgives him an enormous debt, one he could never hope to pay back, and then he goes out and refuses to forgive a fellow-servant who owed him a piddling amount in comparison. The story is meant for us. God has forgiven all of us. His mercy is great, and God intends that we share that forgiveness and mercy with others.

Is it simply coincidence – or is it providential – that we hear these lessons of forgiveness and mercy on the very weekend when we cannot help but think of what happened on September 11 four years ago. Our newspapers, television and radio will constantly remind us of what we could never forget: the terrorist attacks that destroyed the World Trade Center, damaged a significant part of the Pentagon, and saw a plane crash in a field in Pennsylvania. Are we to forgive the people responsible for these acts? Our readings today respond with a resounding, “Yes.” Oh, that doesn’t mean that we are not angry with those responsible. How could we not be? But our anger, no matter how righteous, must not be sustained. Otherwise it becomes destructive and seeks revenge. In that same first reading that we heard, Jesus Ben Sirach says, “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.” The idea of an eye for an eye which many people take to be about revenge is actually about punishment, but even this understanding of justice has been abrogated by Jesus of Nazareth who taught love, compassion, and forgiveness, the hallmarks of the new dispensation, the Kingdom he was founding.

Mohandas Gandhi, a Hindu, tells how much he admired Jesus and his teachings, particularly the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus talks about turning the other cheek and doing good to those who hurt us. He once famously said, “If we lived by the principle of an eye for an eye, then the whole world would be blind.”

Do you remember Lawrence Jenco? A commentary I read on today’s readings says this about him:

“Jenco was held hostage in Lebanon for 19 months, during which he was kept in isolation, beaten, starved, humiliated, chained to a wall and

threatened continually with death. In his account of his ordeal (*Bound to Forgive*, Ave Maria Press, Notre Dame, Ind.: 1995), he wrote that because he himself was a forgiven Christian, he had no other option than to forgive his captors. His faith and his relationship to Jesus Christ demanded it.

“Today the scriptures remind us that we can do no less. Our faith and our relationship with Jesus who died for the forgiveness of our sins permit us no other option. Like Jenco, Gandhi, and John Paul II, we are to forgive without rationalization, without keeping an account, and without deciding upon the worthiness or unworthiness of the one forgiven. As we are forgiven, so must we forgive – fully, freely, from the heart. Only then will the grief and bitter suffering of this day (Sept. 11) be alleviated by an air of forgiveness.” (Preaching Resources, Sept. 11, 2005)