

**Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A
(Sept. 7, 2014)**

Forgive Your Differences

A number of years ago I read about a Jewish woman named Elsa Joseph. She was a wife and mother, and she became separated from her family during the Nazi regime in World War II. Later, after the war, she found out that both of her daughters had been executed in the gas chambers at Auschwitz. She had good reason to be angry and upset and to join the many people who have spent much time hunting down the perpetrators of the Holocaust to punish them, basically seeking revenge or, as they learned from their Hebrew Scripture, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a life for a life.

Rather unexpectedly, but very admirably, Elsa did not join those seeking revenge. Instead she dedicated the rest of her life to the task of reconciliation. She was a concert violinist. She would take up her violin and travel from city to city, from country to country, with a message of forgiveness. Not only in Germany but in places like Northern Ireland and Lebanon and Israel, she would say, “If a Jewish mother can forgive what happened, then why can you not forgive your differences and be reconciled to one another?”

She was a Jewish mother but she had caught the spirit of Jesus in the Gospels as he preaches forgiveness and reconciliation. I don’t know if she was aware of it, but as we know Jesus abrogated the old eye for an eye notion of justice. In the new dispensation there was no place for anything that smacked of vengeance. Instead Jesus taught us to pray, “Forgive us as we forgive others.” It’s not always easy to forgive, and I think Jesus realized that. That’s why he insisted on it so much and gave us the great example from the cross, “Father, forgive them, they don’t know what they are doing.”

In this context it’s impossible not to think of the brutal executions of James Foley and Steven Sotloff. Our hearts go out to their families. In the face of their mourning and personal suffering they acted admirably. They remind me of Elsa Joseph. They have not called for revenge but instead

have celebrated the lives of their sons.

But you know as we reflect in horror at these brutal executions, we have to remember that James Foley and Steven Sotloff are not the only victims of these unending wars. Many families, thousands, tens of thousands, have lost loved ones, and for heads of states it seems impossible to find a solution except to keep on killing. I'm reminded of what the angel said to Mary and what Jesus said to Peter, "For humans this is impossible, but for God all things are possible."

So what are we humans to do? For one thing, of course, we pray. We pray that God will perhaps work a miracle and bring about the peace that for us seems impossible. We pray that before all else there be peace in our own hearts and that, with the help of God, we do what we can to spread that peace and reconciliation around us. In the second reading St. Paul tells us, "Owe no debt to anyone, except the debt that binds us to love one another." As difficult as this task may seem, it's this love that makes it all possible because it's the very love of God that exists within each one of us, a love we are told to share with everyone.

In a few minutes we will turn to one another and say, "The peace of Christ be with you." Let's pray that we mean that sincerely, not just for the person standing next to us, but for all people. Like Elsa Joseph, like the families of James Foley and Steven Sotloff, let's do what we can to bring about peace and reconciliation. Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me.

In our first reading today from the prophet Ezekiel, and in the Gospel passage from Matthew, reconciliation is put in the form of fraternal correction. If some one has done you wrong, we are told, go and make it up with that person, and again, this is more easily said than done. First of all it requires a good bit of discernment on our part. Sometimes we think others are wrong simply because we do not agree with them. But that is not necessarily true. Indeed exactly the opposite may be true.

Jesus puts the whole question of reconciliation in the context of the Church. The unity and solidarity that are to characterize the followers of Jesus cannot exist if there is dissension and division. St. Paul took this very seriously. He went so far as to tell the Corinthians that when they came together to celebrate the Eucharist it was not the Eucharist they were

celebrating because there was division in the community.

Well we know there is division in the Christian community and more specifically within the Catholic Church. Our readings today suggest that we all have a responsibility to do what we can to mend that division – in other words, to bring about reconciliation. At the beginning of the Mass we prayed, You reconcile us to one another and to the Father, and You heal the wounds of sin and division. Reconciliation and healing are the primary reasons why Jesus came into our world, why the Son of God became one of us. I would go so far as to say that the work of salvation is in fact reconciliation and healing. And in doing what we can to heal the wounds of sin and division we join in the mission of Jesus himself, a mission he handed on to his followers, to all of us, his Church, members of his body.

I would also go so far as to say that, as members of the Body of Christ, our responsibilities are not limited to other Catholics or Christians but to all those whom Christ came to save, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, etc.

We gather here every Sunday around the table of the Lord, strengthened by the Eucharist for the task of reconciliation. We go from this place to work with the Spirit to renew the face of the earth. This means confronting what ever keeps us from being a community, whether in the Church or in the larger world outside us. Where there is racism or sexism we must confront them and work to eliminate them. Where there is economic injustice we must speak out against it and work to eliminate it.

“Owe no debt to anyone, except the debt that binds us to love one another,” Paul says in our second reading. As difficult as the task may seem, it’s this love that makes it all possible, because it is the very love of God that exists within each one of us. This means that we can all love one another with the very same love with which God loves us, and that’s why Paul goes on to say, “The one who loves another has fulfilled the law.” The question facing all of us is: what do we do to show our love, because that’s how we join the task of Jesus to heal the wounds of sin and division.

We are all too painfully aware of the tragedy that has occurred in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama this past week. Many people have died and many, many, many more have suffered, are still suffering because of hurricane Katrina. Everyone involved has suffered, but the greatest suffering has been borne by the poor, of whom the majority are African-

Americans. This is an unjust situation and a disgrace in this country in this day and age. Once again our solidarity in the human family gives us responsibilities toward these people. They are our brothers and sisters. It's up to each one of us to decide how we will help relieve the suffering of these people and what we might do to right the wrongs that been committed against them. This is part of that debt of love that Paul talks about and that we all owe to one another.