

Twenty-fourth Sunday Ordinary Time
September 17, 2017

This conversation between Peter and Jesus is really a commentary on the fifth beatitude, which Jesus stated way back in Chapter 5 of St. Matthew's Gospel: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy." Mercy goes against our fallen human nature. Automatically, we tend to play favorites, hold grudges, resent insults, demand our "rights," and care much more about our own hopes, plans, and problems than about others'. When we do take an interest in other people, it's usually because we like them, and not because we view them as so valued by God that he sent his Son to die on the cross for them. When we operate on this merely natural level, we always run into a limit in our ability to forgive those who offend or harm us. But Jesus is teaching us today that a Christian is called to be limitless in forgiveness: to be merciful as God is merciful. We are glad that God is gentle and patient with us, always willing to forgive us, always showering us with his blessings, always there when we need him, always ready to understand us, always ready to sympathize with us before judging us... in short, we are glad that God is merciful with us, although we know we don't really deserve it. And yet, we are often reluctant to be like that with others, just like the man in the parable. If we don't let God help us overcome that reluctance, our hearts will become so closed that eventually Christ's mercy simply won't be able to get in. If we do overcome it, they will open wider and wider, allowing the full flood of God's love to inundate them, making them an oasis for others who suffer, and a magnet for their kindness and generosity. Blessed indeed are the merciful, for showing mercy is the only way to attract it.

Forgiveness doesn't mean ignoring an offense or a crime, pretending it never happened. Forgiveness, mercy, means refusing to let someone else's sin define your life. This is what Jesus showed us on the Cross, when he forgave his executioners. The devil was doing everything possible to force Jesus to break his own principles, to stop loving. But Jesus stayed true to his mission and his message: loving without limits. And that is the path to true interior peace and strength for all of us. Even on a merely human level, forgiveness frees and strengthens our hearts. The case of Jo Nodding, victim of a violent attack and rape in 2004, is an eloquent example. Her attacker denied his guilt and forced a trial, which only added pain and suffering to her and her family. At one point in the trial, the judge said to the attacker: "You have destroyed this woman's life." That didn't sit well with Jo; she didn't want it to be that way. During the process, she was visited by a

victim liaison officer who mentioned the possibility of "restorative justice," of Jo actually going to the prison to meet with her attacker. The idea stayed with her, and four years later, after plenty of preparation, the man agreed to a meeting. They met in the prison, and Jo explained to the young man how his crime had affected her. He was brought to tears by what she said. She hadn't been expecting an apology, but he gave her one. This is how she herself describes the end of their meeting: As the meeting was finishing I was asked if there was anything else I wanted to say, and I gave him what I've later come to think of as 'a gift'. I said to him "What I am about to say to you a lot of people would find hard to understand, but I forgive you for what you did to me. Hatred just eats you up and I want you to go on and have a successful life. If you haven't already forgiven yourself, then I hope in the future you will." I didn't say it to excuse what he did, or to minimize it, but because I wanted myself to be free of that burden of grievance, and as importantly for me, I hoped Darren could learn, move on, and forgive himself. This had a massive impact on Darren – I could see he was shaken by the parting 'gift' I had given him. As I was leaving I wished him good luck for the future... As I left that room I felt on top of the world. Meeting him gave me closure, because I had said everything I had wanted to say and I had taken back some kind of control over my life. I know it had an impact on him. I'm not a victim any more, I'm a survivor. I've been able to make sure something good has come out of something bad. This is what forgiveness does, even just on a natural level: it makes sure that something good comes out of something bad, it sets our hearts free to love more like Christ loves, and that is the secret to the happiness that we all crave.

With practice, we can all learn to forgive the little offenses of every day. It's harder, though, to forgive the big things. Sooner or later, each of us will have to forgive a major offense, maybe even a life-shattering wound inflicted by someone we love dearly. Or we may run into a situation in which we ourselves have committed a sin so grave that we can't seem to forgive ourselves, even though we know God has forgiven us. In these cases, it's much harder to follow Christ's command of limitless mercy, but not impossible. Theologians rightly teach us that forgiveness is an act of the will. It is a decision to let go of the desire for revenge and release the offender into the hands of God. Now, that decision takes place at such a deep level of the soul that it can exist at the same time as strong emotions of anger or resentment. Those emotions don't flow from the will, like our decisions, but are simply natural reactions to the experience of injustice, feelings which we cannot always control. But our decisions, our choices, exist at the very core of the soul, in the will, and

those we can control. In other words, it is possible to truly forgive someone and at the same time to still have feelings of anger or resentment towards them. When that happens, we have to counteract the feelings by prayer and by turning our attention to more productive things. Eventually, though it may take a long time, God's grace will overflow from our will, where we have already forgiven the offender, and heal our emotions. God's mercy is limitless and if we ask with all our heart, he will give us the grace we need to treat others as he treats us. Are we strong enough and willing to ask for that grace?