

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time

When I looked at the scriptures in preparation for this weekend, I realized that the theme of forgiveness in the Gospel passage tied in so beautifully with last Sunday's gospel. That Gospel dealt with how to approach those whom you care about who are hurting themselves and others by their actions. I thought that this would be an opportunity to build on that foundation and take it to the important next level, which is a forgiving of that person. It was harder than I thought.

This weekend is the 10th Anniversary of the tragic and horrifying events of September 11, 2001, and against that backdrop, I found I was really struggling with the idea of forgiveness as most of us understand it as the concept of "forgive and forget".

I realized that in that ideal of forgiveness, I could not forgive. Time can have a way of softening and healing and giving better perspective on many events in our lives. Forgiveness for those events should be made easier.

In prayer and reflection, I can think of a good number of things that have happened to me by the direct or indirect actions of others in which I was able to forgive and move on, but not the events of that day.

The senseless loss of innocent life, the unimaginable horror and burden of grief for those families and friends left behind, makes it impossible to both forgive and forget.

One could argue that every generation experiences a loss of innocence. "Things are not as they used to be" is a mantra of every generation.

On that day, that loss of innocence was replaced by fear, and I am very angry about that.

The struggle of forgiveness is always rooted in our anger over that which we are called to forgive.

Are we wrong to be angry over the events of that day? No, our anger is justified. It was and remains, a great injustice. And anger over any injustice is a mark of authentic love and is often the vehicle for seeking justice.

The civil rights movement of the 1960's came about because of the anger over injustices done by society to minorities, and would not have happened at all if not for that anger. But the righteous indignation over inequities as voiced by people like Martin Luther King was heard, and responded to by America and positive change occurred and is still occurring.

Other parts of that movement, also based on anger, such as the Black Panthers.... failed.

What was the difference?

The difference between the two approaches was **not** one of religion, as some might think.

Historically, anger in the name of religion has failed to achieve righteousness. How much righteousness was achieved by the religiously fanatical men who were the cause of 9/11?

I propose that the "type" of anger matters. Anger based on bitterness or the desire for revenge is doomed to the hope of forgiveness.

It is un-forgiveness.

Our first reading speaks poetically of this type of anger.

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.

Holding tightly to anger, in such a way as to wish harm to the offender is to some degree, natural, and is a part of our fallen human nature. But the effect of this type of anger is poisonous to us.

It slowly kills our ability and willingness to forgive because it eradicates our ability and willingness to love the offender. And that was the difference in the struggle for Civil Rights. All those voices were angry, yes, but only those voices tempered in love were successful.

When I speak of love here, I am not speaking of an emotion. I am speaking of a desire, a desire for the good of the beloved.

If I say I love my spouse, yet allow her to continue down a destructive path, then I have reduced love to a feeling, or perhaps something even more base.

I truly love another when I am angry over the injustice caused by their behavior..... yet I desire their redemption, their return to health, their return to balance, because I see what their behavior is doing to them more clearly than what it is doing to me. That was the message of last week.

That type of love is genuine and it is only this kind of love that can lead to authentic and fruitful forgiveness.

Religion comes into positive play here, for it can be, and should be, our guide and example of love. That God is Himself love, should be motivation enough. Seeing the fullness of God's love on that cross, and knowing it... in His act of self giving at this altar... should be a profound experience of the love of God.

A God who wills what is good for us, to this extreme, should not be ignored.

In the face of this love, love is our only legitimate response.

True forgiveness cannot happen because I will it to happen. It is not a matter of the will.

Only love, which sometimes must be a matter of the will, can make authentic forgiveness happen.

In this understanding of love, of its self-sacrificing nature, forgiveness, in the sense that we WILL the very best for the other, is not only possible..... but inevitable. We will forgive.

How do we extend that to the evil of 9/11?

Not by forgiving as the world forgives. The hurts and the damages are too deep to make that possible.

Of course we work to the extent possible for reconciliation here on earth.

But open dialogue on what separates one nation from another, one religion from another, one political ideology from another can only truly work if on September 12th, we make the decision to love and desire the best for the one who hurt us most. It starts at that close of a level.

Jesus sacrificed everything for everyone. Let us extend His Mercy to others, also.