

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A
Sirach 27:30-28:7
Psalm 103:1-2, 3-4, 9-10, 11-12
Romans 14:7-9
Matthew 18:21-35
Rev. Charles B. Gordon, C.S.C.
The Garaventa Center
The University of Portland

Our Scripture readings today are very demanding. They remind us that we who crave God's forgiveness for *ourselves*, must forgive those who have sinned against *us*. As Graham Greene has written, "*No one* can stand not being forgiven. That's God's privilege. And it's a privilege that God doesn't exercise." God has begun by forgiving us, and now invites us to forgive each other.

There is no disguising the fact that it is very difficult to forgive those who have hurt us. We all have crosses to bear in life, and as Christians we try to embrace them willingly, -- even joyfully. But the additional burden of resentment against those who have injured us, compounded over weeks and months and years, can eventually crush us -- and snuff out the flame of our faith. We need to forgive, for our own sakes. The alternative to forgiveness is a ceaseless process of self-destruction. Every human soul has the right to be free from hate.

It's *so* difficult to forgive, that we should try very hard not to take offence in the first place. I have a friend who insists that the key to living in a community is to learn how to make *excuses* for one another. When another person, by word or action, has done something to offend us, and we feel ourselves sliding into anger against them, we need to immediately exert all our intelligence, imagination and good will in an effort to find some benign explanation for what they have done, in place of the hurtful one we have grabbed onto first. We need to give one another the *benefit of the doubt*. And

you know, a good percentage of the time it will turn out that our hard-won charitable interpretation will turn out to be accurate.

Like many of us, C.S. Lewis used to be offended by the undisguised hatred he encountered in reading the Psalms -- all those appeals by the psalmist to God to utterly destroy the psalmist's enemies. Then, one day, Lewis had an insight: It seemed to him that in seeing unmasked hatred in the Psalms, he was seeing the natural result of injuring a human being. When I hurt people, I am tempting them to hate me. They may resist the temptation, and they may not. If they fail, if they die spiritually because of their hatred for me, how do I, who provoked their hatred, stand? For in addition to the original injury, I have done them a far worse one. I have introduced into their lives at best a new temptation, and at worst, a new besetting sin.

All this is a terrible price to pay for the momentary pleasure of having "zinged" someone -- for having given them what we think they deserved -- for having put them in their place. A moment, or an hour later, we have probably forgotten all about the incident. But in our victim the wound can fester, causing untold damage.

Once resentment has set in, it is terribly hard to root out. Oh, to forgive for the moment is not difficult, but to go on forgiving, to forgive the same offence again every time it recurs to the memory -- that's the real difficulty. C.S. Lewis suggests a way it can be done. He writes, "My resource is to look for some action of my own which is open to the same charge as the one I am resenting. If I still smart to remember how 'A' let *me* down, I must remember how I let 'B' down." What someone has done to us can seem absolutely unforgivable, until we realize that we confidently expect to be forgiven for doing a quite similar thing to someone else.

Of course, all the wrong is seldom on one side. Most of us have to do our

forgiving while we are being forgiven. G.K. Chesterton wrote, "In all family quarrels and most other ones, *everyone* is wrong." How easy it is to agree with that statement from an objective distance, but how difficult it is to acknowledge its truth when we are convinced that *we* are the offended party. As our Old Testament reading says, "Wrath and anger are hateful things, yet the sinner hugs them tight."

Let's admit it: There is a perverse pleasure in having a grievance. What a disappointment it is -- for one self-revealing moment -- to discover that the other party is not to blame. And how a resentment, while it lasts, draws one back to nurse and fondle it.

I know the temptation in listening to all of this is to think -- "That's all well and good, but it doesn't really apply to my grievance against 'X.'" I wish we could put our bad feelings behind us, but I just *can't* take the first step. I can't risk it. What if I reach out, and he or she just takes the opportunity to wound me again. It would be just like them to do so -- and it would only make the whole thing a hundred times worse. What if he or she gets self-righteous on me and insists that all the fault was mine?"

There *are* no guarantees. But if we dare to communicate where resentment exists, reconciliation *can* occur. And as Christians we have to take the chance. We talk a lot about trusting God -- about taking risks for God. Do we mean it? This is the acid test.

And imagine how wonderful it would be if it worked -- to be able to throw off the hair shirt of resentment and be healed. It can make us feel as we sometimes did as a child, when we were leaving the church after going to confession -- all new and clean and whole again.

There is, in Christianity, something called the "Difficult Prayer." It goes like this: "Lord, please treat me exactly the same way as I treat others." If we

can be truly reconciled, we can pray that prayer with more sincerity -- and less fear and trembling.