

## Forgiveness Sunday

*"The Lord said: If you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matthew 6:14-15)*

The power of forgiveness is vastly underrated in our society today; that is because it is profoundly misunderstood. We are a society in which it is not uncommon to hear, "I'm sorry", but where it has become quite rare to hear, "Forgive me."

Why is this?

At first glance most people might say that there is really not much of a difference between the two statements. "I'm sorry", and, "Forgive me", mean the same thing.

But do they, really?

I'm quite convinced that they don't.

"I'm sorry." is all about me.

"Forgive me." is all about the person I've offended.

Let me make this clearer. When I say that I'm sorry for something I'm admitting that I've done something to offend, but I'm also making the presupposition that I am automatically forgiven simply for offering my apology (and an apology is, in fact, a fancy name for an excuse.)

But, when I say, "Forgive me"; I've put the ball into someone else's court. I've admitted that I've done wrong and that I may make no presumptions on that other person's grace and mercy.

Americans in general are loathe to put ourselves in positions where we must wait upon others to deign to show us 'grace'. It seems outrageously undemocratic. It offends our pride. It is a supreme threat to our egos and overdeveloped sense of self esteem.

What if they refuse to forgive? What if they refuse us grace? What if they don't show mercy?

According to today's gospel that is their problem--and a very serious one, indeed.

But forgiveness--the willingness to ask for it and, even more important, the willingness to give it--can undo great hurts and overcome great evils. In fact, it is the only power in this world that can truly heal some of the horrific wounds dealt within our families, our parishes, our larger societies, not to mention those that fester between ethnic groups and nations. Forgiveness, the handmaiden of mercy, alone has the power to heal when justice has been exhausted and every other remedy--including violence has been tried.

The Lord knew this when He gave us these words concerning forgiveness (and, of course, the words in the Our Father which preceded it in this gospel wherein we ask, "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us"). He knew that unless we learned to let go of the offenses we held against others and unless we learned to ask their forgiveness for the offenses they held against us, the spiral of violence and hatred in our lives and in the wider world would never cease.

Violence in the world around us has certainly not ended. We would be unduly naive to expect it to anytime soon. But the violence in our own lives--especially the internal violence of misdirected anger, which so often erupts against family, friends, coworkers, and even strangers on the highways--can be averted and overcome through the spirit of forgiveness. **This is done both through the willingness to forgive others and in the willingness to seek forgiveness for the wrongs we, ourselves, have done.** It is not accomplished through a cheap and easy, "I'm sorry", but through a heartfelt, "Forgive me."

Ultimately, forgiveness is an act of love on the part of the one who forgives and an act of humility on the part of the seeker. It is the icon of our relationship with God, Himself. If we are unable to practice it in our human relationships, then, as the gospel warns us, we cannot expect to receive it in our relationship with Him.