

Last week I mentioned forgiveness as a part of what the gift of the Holy Spirit means to the entire church. Next week I'll be inside San Quentin as part of a Kairos weekend where forty-two men from outside go in for three days to meet with forty prisoners. It's *Cursillo* inside prison walls. A number of us at St. Stephen's have attended *Cursillo* weekends and would be happy to answer any questions you might have about it. John Gulick is working this team in San Quentin with me.

Kairos weekends take place in institutions all over the world. I've been asked to deliver one of the set talks. The one I'm doing is called "Forgiveness of Others" and I want to share part of it with you today. You can imagine what a big deal forgiveness is for those "doing time" in penal institutions. But now I want to invite you to imagine you are hearing this as a prisoner. What actually separates us on the outside from those in prison is just a couple of breaks, a couple of choices, a couple of advantages. So try to put yourself in their place, or if you can't do that, imagine you are there watching them hear this talk. It begins kind of like this:

Yesterday we talked about forgiveness, forgiveness of ourselves, how God wants to forgive us, and of our need to forgive ourselves, to accept his forgiveness.

We clergy shouldn't need forgiveness. Right? We shouldn't mess up. We DON'T mess up. We've got it all figured out. Right? It wasn't until after I was ordained that I began to realize how much I'd internalized that attitude and how wrong I was. Without realizing it, I hid by role-playing who I thought God would want me to be. I "put-on" who I would want to be for God, for my wife, my family, my church. As if none of them could really see through my feeble attempts to impersonate the "good husband, father, pastor."

Hard as I tried to hold them together, slowly things began to fall apart. I blamed other people for my own choices—the government, the war in Vietnam, my boss, my first wife. People didn't understand me. They were 'stupid,' 'bigoted,' 'uneducated,' 'intolerant.' It wasn't until I was on a *Cursillo* weekend and experienced acceptance that I began to feel safe enough to recognize my own intolerance. I began to look at and let go of my own self-hatred, my harsh judgment of myself. I saw that what made me so hard on other people was my pride at being even harder on myself. It wasn't forgiving myself I experienced, so much as "lightening up" on myself. And first I had to lighten up on others.

And that's when it hit me. That's when I opened the door. All of us have said—probably many times—the Lord's Prayer: how would we stand if God answered, "Yes!" What if Our Father said "Okay, I'll do it. Just like you asked, I'll answer." Think about it. Every time we say the "Our Father," we pray, "forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." Every time we pray it, we ask God to forgive us our sins JUST AS we forgive the sins of others.

And then to emphasize the point, Jesus goes on to say, “If you forgive others the wrongs they have done to you, God will forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then God will not forgive you the wrongs you have done.”

This point, forgiving others, is central to Jesus life and teaching. It comes up over and over again. Peter, for instance, a little challenged by Jesus’ teaching on forgiveness, asks him one of those questions that’s really a not a question but a kind of objection, “Come on Lord,” he must have had that tone of voice, “if my brother keeps on sinning against me, how many times am I supposed to forgive him? What! as many as seven times?”

“No, not seven,” answers Jesus, “but seventy times seven.” Then Jesus tells a devastating parable.

“The kingdom of heaven is like this. Once there was a king who decides to audit his servants’ accounts. One of them is brought to him who owes him a large sum of money. But this servant doesn’t have the money so the king orders that he be sold into slavery with all his belongings, his wife and children and until his debt is paid.

“The servant falls on his knees, ‘Oh gracious King, be patient with me,’ he begs, ‘and I’ll repay everything!’ The King feels so sorry for him, he forgives him the debt and lets him go. Then the servant goes out and he runs into one of his fellow servants who owes him a few dollars. And he grabs him by the throat and starts choking him. ‘Pay me back what you owe me, you deadbeat’ he says. And his fellow servant falls down and begs *him*, ‘Be patient with me and I will pay you back.’ But this fellow refuses. Instead he has him thrown into jail until he can pay the debt.

“Well, when the other servants of the King hear what has happened, they’re so upset that they go to the King and tell him everything. So he calls the servant back in. ‘You worthless slave,’ he begins, “I forgave you the whole amount just because you asked me to. You should have had mercy on your fellow servant as I had mercy on you!’ The king was so angry that he threw the servant into jail until he could pay the whole amount.”

And Jesus concludes, “That is how my Father in heaven will treat everyone of you unless you forgive those you need to forgive from your heart.”

So what is forgiveness?

It is something we do. It is not just a change of feelings about another person. Rather, it is a decision . . . I decide to stop treating another person as though they owed me something. It’s a promise to God to stop blaming someone for a harm that has come to me. Failure to forgive can destroy our lives. It saps all the energy we might have for something good and eats away at us. Unforgiveness, holding a grudge, is like taking poison in order to get back at someone because of what they did to us. Or it’s like we’re holding on to their throat, choking someone we believe harmed us as if our own lives depended on it, just like the servant in the parable. We’re unwilling (terrified really) to open our hands so that in them we can receive the gracious love and forgiveness, the embrace that God has for us. So it’s for our own sake, as well as in obedience to

the Lord we love, that we make the decision to forgive. It's so we can receive God's loving embrace. It doesn't necessarily mean that our feelings change.

So say to God, "You know how angry I am at this person. You know that if I could get my hands around their throat, I would strangle them. But I choose to forgive because you have asked me to and because I want your grace, forgiveness, and love. I forgive this person out of obedience to you, Father, and I hold them up to you and pray for their good. I pray also that you would fill me with your love and compassion and with understanding for this person, and for myself." God never fails to answer this prayer.

After the resurrection Jesus breathes on us making us new creatures and giving us his authority, he says to us "Whose sins you forgive are forgiven, whose sins you retain are retained"? It makes a difference when we forgive.

And God CAN change our hearts about the people we decide to forgive. I know that because he has changed mine. It's hard to believe, when your anger and hatred are so great, that anything can help. But, God can help. He can make a NEW CREATURE out of us.

Often the ones who hurt us most are the ones closest to us, the ones we love the most, the ones we trust the most. Jesus had that problem with Judas, and even with Peter. He's still having it with me, maybe even with some of you. We have to keep forgiving, even as God keeps forgiving us.

You may have someone in your life you hold in unforgiveness – your father, your mother, your brother or sister, your wife or girlfriend . . . all those people who have failed to see Jesus in you, to see you as a person of supreme importance to God . . . the officer who arrested you, the person or persons who testified against you, the prosecutor or maybe even the defense attorney, your judge, the person in the bunk next to you, the resident or CO who gives you a rough time in the mess hall, all those who feel they are superior to you, anyone you hate because of prejudice or pride . . . it could be the person who doesn't forgive you . . .

My most troubled relationship has probably been with my Dad. I've spent plenty of time blaming him, holding him responsible for one thing or another, replaying mean, careless comments he made to me, times when he struck me across the face with the back of his hand, or just shamed me by threatening to. And some of my friends and counselors have urged me to indulge my feelings of victimization and abuse at the hands of my father. But as I began to accept God's forgiveness, I began to see him as a vulnerable, flawed man who was doing the best he could with his life. We became friends, for the most part, and forgave each other near the end of his life. I believe he changed, softened, became more human, more open, partly because I was able to forgive him and accept God's forgiveness for myself as well as for him. Now that he has died, I am increasingly grateful to him for being the father he was to me, as imperfect as he was, and I have found that in some mysterious way my relationship with him has grown, even though he is gone. He has become a model for me of the true father's love, of the love of the Father who welcomes home the wayward son, and who extends his love even to the self-righteous older son. God has redeemed him as a father and shown me through him how to become the father he couldn't be.

Someone told me that the Early Church Fathers used to say “when someone we love is alive, they are here or there, but when they have died they are wherever we are.” They need our forgiveness too and can grow in God’s love even though they have died. And we need to release them, to forgive them.

Let’s Pray,

Lord, you have taught me to pray: “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

In your name I am to repair broken relationships. I am to mend the broken, to redeem those lost to me in outer darkness, to welcome back the wanderer who returns. Make me ready to receive them as restored, forgiven, just as you receive me as forgiven.

Help me to remember that this power is your power to be used for your sake. Help me not to turn away from anyone who asks for forgiveness, from anyone who needs my forgiveness. Help me overcome my unforgiveness, any hindrance that would keep me from sharing the fullness and the power of your saving and forgiving grace.

AMEN.