

SEPTEMBER 11, 2011: TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Sirach 27:30-29:9 Romans 14:7-9 Matthew 18:21-35

Though I hate to admit it, my homilies normally create very little stir in the people who hear them. But one I gave years ago on God's unconditional forgiveness was an exception. It wasn't well received. One man especially, as he was going out the church door, angrily whirled around and yelled, "Thank God my teenage son wasn't here this morning. If he'd heard that nonsense I'd never be able to control him again!"

He hit the forgiveness nail on the head. When we forgive, we give up control.

In today's second reading, Paul reminds the Christian community in Rome that, no matter what we do in life, we somehow relate to others. "None of us lives for oneself, and no one dies for oneself." Of course, at this point of his letter the Apostle's concerned with how we relate to God. But he also adds a significant comment about Jesus' relationship with us. "For this is why Christ died and came to life, that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living." In other words, Jesus' dying and rising has something to do with our dying and rising. What he did, he didn't do in a vacuum.

Even without knowing about Jesus' future death and resurrection, or even an afterlife as we know it, Sirach sees how our proper relations with others adds fulfillment or tension to our daily lives, especially when it comes to forgiveness.

"Wrath and anger are hateful things, yet the sinner hugs them tight. The vengeful will suffer Yahweh's vengeance, for he remembers their sins in detail. Forgive your neighbor's injustice; then when you pray, your own sins will be forgiven." One need not reach the pearly gates before one benefits from forgiving others.

Though the historical Jesus, along with his fellow Pharisees, believed in an afterlife, as a good Jew he, like Sirach, was concerned that each follower of God experience as free and fulfilling life as possible right here and now. Such freedom and fulfillment demands we not be controlled by others, even in situations in which others are not actively trying to control us. The latter always happens when we refuse to forgive.

Matthew's Jesus presumes forgiveness is a life-long process. Obviously referring back to the Genesis 4 narrative in which Lamech promises to avenge himself seventy-seven times, this itinerant Galilean preacher demands his followers look at the issue of vengeance from a completely new perspective. It's the letting go, not the enforcing of vengeance that brings happiness. Operating from the Semite premise that seven is the perfect number, Jesus commands we're to forgive not just the perfect seven times, but "seventy-seven times" an idiom for infinity.

But Jesus also gives a new twist to Sirach's belief that God will eventually forgive those who forgive. According to his well-known parable, we should forgive because we've already been forgiven by God. God's forgiveness doesn't flow from our forgiveness; it precedes it. It's the motive for our forgiveness.

Following our sacred authors' insight about control, it would appear that God has no choice except to forgive unconditionally. If he/she doesn't, God would be controlled by God's creatures.

Throughout Scripture we're encouraged to be "holy as Yahweh is holy." The Hebrew word for holy - "kadosh" - simply means "other." Since God is totally other from all creation, so holy people are to be other from their fellow human beings.

A friend once mentioned in a dialogue homily that she couldn't imitate any of God's attributes except forgiveness. "It's the only part of God's life," she said, "that I can make part of my life."

Not only would our forgiving behavior make us other, our free, uncontrolled life would also make us other.

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SEPTEMBER 18, 2011: TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR
 Isaiah 55:6-4 Philippians 1:20-24, 27a Matthew 20:1-16a

Unless we know something about the community for whom Matthew writes, today's gospel makes little sense. After hearing this passage proclaimed in the old Sunday lectionary, my strong pro-union father warned us that the landowner's behavior was the main reason unions are essential. Without them, employers can pay whatever they want to whomever they want, whenever they want. Workers would have no rights.

Though I presume my father (in agreement with the Catholic Church's teachings on social justice) was correct, Matthew wasn't writing for him or his concern for workers' rights. Matthew composed his gospel for second and third generation Jewish/Christians. By the time he writes in the late 70s, an unforeseen phenomenon is playing out. A church which had begun almost 50 years before as a completely Jewish religious movement was nearing a point at which Jews were becoming a minority in their own movement.

Gentiles were always welcome in Christianity, but since Jesus was originally regarded simply as a reformer of Judaism, these non-Jewish converts were expected to embrace Judaism and its 613 laws before they could begin going down the road of imitating Jesus' death and resurrection.

This practice continued only into the late 40s when liberals like Paul of Tarsus began baptizing Gentiles without insisting they first convert to Judaism and its laws. Though Gentile/Christians appreciated this 180 degree turnabout in church discipline, lots of Jewish/Christians had problems with it. They had borne "the day's burden and the heat," submitting to circumcision and the responsibility of keeping those all-pervasive regulations. In their minds, this newfangled way of bringing Gentiles into the faith was clearly unjust.

That's when Matthew's Jesus comes on the scene with his story of a landowner who pays each of his workers the same amount of money even though some worked over twelve hours while other worked just one or two!

When confronted over his blatantly unjust wage scale, the employer reminds his workers he did nothing illegal or unjust: he paid the amount each picker and trimmer had agreed upon. They could only challenge his generosity, not his breach of contract.

In other words, Jewish/Christians who still were obliged to follow the Mosaic laws were not being treated unjustly by God. As Jews, they had made that commitment at the foot of Sinai 1,200 years before. God simply was demonstrating God's generosity by not demanding the same commitment from Gentiles.

At its core, this message, though distasteful to some, is fundamental to our faith: God rarely works in black/white, either/or patterns, and more disturbing, God's never bought into a "one size fits all" theology.

Deutero-Isaiah discovered this aspect of divine behavior more than 500 years before Jesus' birth. The same God who is as close to us as our breath, at times can be as far away from us "as the heavens are above the earth." Like all people of faith, the prophet frequently encountered a God who is immanent and transcendent at the same time. Some of what God does fits into our puny minds; a lot of it doesn't.

No wonder Paul struggles with his personal living and dying in our Philippians pericope. From his first letter to the Thessalonians we know that when he first began to follow the risen Jesus, he presumed the Parousia was just around the corner. But as the years went on and Jesus' Second Coming was delayed, the Apostle was forced to ask the questions we find in this second reading. At some point, someone seems to have changed the rules of the game.

This is a great occasion to reflect on how our understanding of God has changed since we first learned about God as children. I presume some aspects we like, others create problems,

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