

“It Is Wise to Forgive”: Homily Preached at St. Philip Neri Church, Waban, Massachusetts*

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LAST MONDAY, I boarded a flight from Lagos in southwestern Nigeria to the city of Kaduna in northern Nigeria. For those who are familiar with the history of Christian and Muslim relations in northern Nigeria, Kaduna has witnessed many religious riots within the past decade, leading to destruction of lives and property. On board the same flight, in fact sitting next to me, was a Protestant pastor. He came on board with a Muslim preacher who assisted him in holding his carry-on luggage. The Muslim preacher sat in the next row.

We all exchanged greetings and introduction—the Protestant pastor, the Muslim preacher, and I, a Roman Catholic priest. The Protestant pastor told me they were returning from an interfaith conference in Mombassa, Kenya. I was able to observe, meanwhile, that the Protestant pastor had an artificial hand. As we got on talking, he told me how he ended up with an artificial hand. His hand had been cut off during a religious riot in northern Nigeria. And, he said, it was very difficult for him to forgive. It took him many years. But when he finally did, he regained his peace. And now, he is actively involved in interreligious dialogue with Muslims. He was even traveling with a Muslim preacher, and both were returning from an interreligious conference in Kenya.

Today, the word of God challenges us to forgive. It is a very difficult thing to do. Sometimes we hear people say: Forgive and forget. If it were possible to forget it would be very easy to forgive. The fact is, when someone hurts

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you and you still feel the pain, forgiving that person is almost entirely out of the question.

That Protestant minister is a lesson in forgiveness. No doubt he still bears the pain. The scar, the artificial hand, serve as a brutal and constant reminder that something cruel and unjust was done to him. But he has been able to forgive. And that is what the Lord is asking of us in today's scripture readings.

When Peter asked Jesus: "How often must I forgive my brother when he wrongs me? Seven times?" Jesus gave him an answer that must have astounded him. "Not seven times. But I say, seventy times seven times." And he went on to teach Peter, and all of us, that to forgive is to be like God. To forgive is divine. God, says Jesus, is like a ruler who is very generous in forgiving his officials, and who challenges his officials to do likewise to their fellow officials.

The teaching of Jesus confirms the wisdom in the Book of Sirach, which we heard in the first reading:

Should a man nourish anger against his fellow
and expect healing from God?
Should a man refuse mercy to his fellows
yet seek pardon for his own sins?
If he who is but flesh cherishes wrath
who will forgive his sins?

Forgive your neighbor's injustice,
then when you pray,
your own sins will be forgiven. (Sir 28:3–5, 2)

Jesus' teaching on forgiveness reminds us of something about ourselves, about each of us; something we know but try to ignore; and that is, we are, each of us, sinners in need of God's forgiving love. When God forgives us, he gives us peace, even though we do not deserve it. By our own sins, we disturb the peace of the world. We alter the equilibrium that God has put in the world he made. God put the world in order. Our sins—yours and mine—distort the justice that God has put in the world. We do not deserve peace. We do not deserve mercy. Our thought, word, action, and omission distort the beauty of the world. But we who do not deserve peace ask the Lord for peace when we plead for his mercy. And as the psalmist said in the responsorial psalm: "He does not treat us according to our sins nor repay us according to our faults."

God's forgiving love is God's offer of peace to undeserving sinners that we are. We can only receive it when we too offer peace to those who

disturb our peace. In today's logic that sounds foolish. The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche even ridiculed Christ in this regard. Nietzsche said only a person who is not favored by the balance of terror would forgive someone who has been unjust to him. Only a wimp would forgive. If you are stronger than the aggressor you should and would revenge.

Yes. This is one Gospel teaching in which Christ is asking his disciples to act like fools. But acting like a fool does not make you a fool. Sometimes, a wise person acts like a fool.

Surely, there are people we have hurt. Let us pray for their peace in this Mass. And there are people who have hurt us. Let us pray for their peace, too. By that we will show that we truly mean what we say and truly say what we mean in the Our Father, the prayer that Jesus taught us: "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us."

The Eucharist we are about to receive is the abiding presence of God's forgiving love offered to undeserving sinners. May we become what we receive. May our presence in the world be a sign of the presence of God's forgiving love. Amen.

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