

**24<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME; Cycle – A; Sept. 17<sup>th</sup> 2023**  
**Sirach 27:30-28:7 Romans 14:7-9; Matthew 18:21-35**

Dear Sisters & Brothers,

It is the rabbinic teaching that even God forgives a person for his offense only three times. So we too need not go beyond that. In every culture people find forgiveness as almost an unattainable virtue. But today's first reading and the gospel passage declare a hard reality that unless we forgive the offenses of others and reconcile with the offenders, God will never forgive us. The Book of Sirach was written almost 200 years before Christ and some of the instructions we find in it, are equally applicable today as they were 2000 years ago. The author asks, ***“Could anyone nourish anger against another and expect mercy from the Lord? Could anyone refuse mercy to another like himself, can seek pardon from his own sins?”*** It is amazing to notice that Sirach who was brought up in the Mosaic Law of, ‘An eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth could surpass the same Law and teach on unconditional forgiveness.

In today's gospel Peter asks Jesus, “Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive? As many as seven times?” But we don't know how Peter got this number seven? Anyhow, this gave Jesus the opportunity to teach on forgiveness through the parable of the unforgiving servant. The last verse of the parable is the supplement to the last part of the prayer the ‘Our Father.’ Here too Jesus puts a condition, **“Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”** Then he confirms the same with great emphasis in these words, **‘If you forgive others their transgressions your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, neither will your heavenly Father forgive your transgressions.’** I don't know how much attention we give to this great prayer? Only those who can forgive the transgressions of others are eligible to pray ‘The Our Father,’ period. Here we don't find Jesus keeping any separation between what offenses are to be forgiven and what should not be. He means all offenses; because God forgives all our offenses. He does not ration his forgiveness and compassion. St. Thomas Aquinas says, **“God is ready to forgive all our sins but one, the sin of not forgiving others. He cannot forgive that because it is a sin against the Holy Spirit through him the forgiveness comes.”**

Among the entire directives of Jesus the hardest one to observe is his command to forgive someone who hurts our feelings; who causes serious harm to innocent people. It is not hard for us to sit in one place and pray for the whole day; we can fast for 24 hours; we can engage in charitable acts even beyond our capacity. But how can we forgive our enemies? We all feel relieved when we can retaliate our enemies and silence our opponents. But when Jesus asks us to forgive our enemies he means it literally. In the

parable we notice that the king fully forgave his servant a huge debt he owed. But when he failed to pardon a small loan owed by his fellow servant, the king revoked his pardon and punished the wicked servant who was not compassionate. And Jesus emphasizes, '*So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives your brother from your heart.*' If we read the words of the wife of the Pilot who flew flight 93 which crashed in the field of Penselvenya on 9/11, it is clear that forgiveness of our enemies is possible. **Sandy Dahl, the wife says, "If we learn nothing else from this tragedy, we learn that life is short and there is no time for hate."**

*There are three types of people we find in the world. The first type will never forgive someone who may have hurt them, no matter who the offender is. The second type of people will forgive someone unwillingly because they believe that God will not forgive them unless they forgive others. The third category of people can forgive someone willingly even when they have suffered injustice because they believe that **God has forgiven their sins and they appreciate God's compassion. Only those who can appreciate the forgiveness of God, can forgive somebody who may have offended them.*** The practice of forgiveness is an invaluable stepping stone to peace. It is healing to our self and healing our relationship with others. The highest example of forgiveness we find is on the mount of Calvary where Jesus forgave his assassins. All the religions exalt the virtue of forgiveness. The Hindu sacred book *Bhagavad Gita* says, "*If you want to see the brave, look at those who can forgive. If you want to see the heroic, look at those who can love in return for hatred.*" The hatred and anger slowly grow up in the unforgiving persons and they are burdened by them. The moment they forgive the offenders they get a big relief and healing. **Lewis B., the author says, "To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you."** According to Robert Enright, the founder of the International Forgiveness Institute at the University of Wisconsin, describes forgiveness as: "**Giving up the resentment to which you are entitled and offering to the person who hurt you, friendlier attitudes to which they are not entitled.**" We forgive someone so that we can let go of the bitterness and the hatred that rankle our soul. Martin Luther King Jr. says, "**We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love.**" Mother Theresa says, "**If we really want to love, we must learn how to forgive.**"