



by Mary M. McGlone

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September 17, 2017

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Sometimes it's hard to figure out if the Lectionary addresses us as a philosophy class or as kindergarteners. Our reading from Sirach offers a little philosophy mixed with psychology, all under the heading of wisdom. The thrust of the entire reading is summarized in our first line: "Wrath and anger are hateful things, yet the sinner hugs them tight." We might wish that Mark Twain or C. S. Lewis had given us a short story illustrating that theme as both of them had a delightful ability to portray people's foolish ability to maintain their own misery while thinking they were exhibiting moral superiority.

One of our sisters explained Sirach's truth by commenting that some people go through life pressing their bruises. Such folks are loathe to let an injury heal or go away; they seem to find comfort or moral security in the status of being the injured party.

Today's Gospel takes up the theme of what to do with anger or injury. With Peter as the one who starts the discussion, we seem to leave the college classroom and go to recess time at a grade-school. We can picture Peter looking around at the other disciples and raising an eyebrow as he asks Jesus, "How often do I have to forgive such as these?" With princely magnanimity, he proposes going to extremes. His question and semi-offer, "seven times?" is really a way of asking, "Should I forgive

lots more often than seems to be reasonable?” Jesus responds with what could be made into a rhythmic playground chant: “Not just seven / but seventy-seven / over and again / forever and ever / Amen!”

To help the group get the message, Jesus weaves them a tale about a great con-artist who amassed a debt so big that their language didn’t have real numbers to describe it. In those days, it would have taken an army of 100,000 with each soldier carrying a 100 lb. pack of silver to pay off that guy’s debt. Putting on an Oscar-worthy sad face, the debtor begged for a little time to get it together, and the master let him off the hook knowing that repayment was ridiculously improbable. Then, that wicked charlatan who should have been throwing a block party to celebrate his redemption, instead threw one of his poor companions in jail for a debt that, while miniscule in comparison to the first, was way more than the poor guy could come up with. Of course, nobody cried when they heard that the once-forgiven, never-forgiving debtor ended up getting just what he had given the other.

The story Jesus told in response to Peter’s question ultimately raised a much deeper question. Peter wanted to know how much he had to put up with in the community. The parable of the unforgiving debtor asks what kind of world disciples want to create.

Sirach told his readers that remembering that we are all going to die can shed important light on the choices we make today. In his novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the Nobel Prize-winning author Gabriel Garcia Marquez told the story of Amaranta, a woman whose name seemed to be an indecisive combination of the words *amor* and *amarga*, love and bitterness. Amaranta had received a vision in which she learned that she was to weave her own shroud, and when she had finished, she would die. She did her work faithfully, sometimes weaving, sometimes tearing it apart, consistently reworking it until the day it was done, and she was ready to die. Her artisan task was symbolic of the undertaking of every human life. We each weave our own stories, mending, tearing, making mistakes and introducing new textures and themes; undoing and reworking until one day the task comes to completion.

As individuals, the life we weave is in our hands. We cannot determine what will come our way, but we can decide how we will weave it into our story, how we will interpret it, whether we will let it engender love or bitterness. As communities, the world we pray for can only come about through the work of human hands that are

open to receive the grace and work together to make a world worthy of the people of God.

Peter asked Jesus: “How often must I forgive?” Sirach asks us: “Could anyone refuse mercy to another like himself?” Jesus asks us what kind of world we wish to create. In the long run, forgiving what others have done may be a very small price to pay for the privilege of living in a world where the compassion of God appears not just seven times but “seventy-seven / over and again / now and forever / Amen!”

### **SIRACH 27:30—28:7**

The Book of Sirach might be thought of as the *Philosophy for Dummies* from 200 B.C.E. Ben Sira, the author, was a purveyor of proverbs. (It was the Greeks who added the “ch” to his name.) Ben Sira’s goal was to show the Israelites who lived among sophisticated Greeks that their traditions were every bit as valuable as anything the pagan philosophers offered.

Not all of Sirach’s teaching will hold up to 21st century standards, especially when it comes to questions of the role of woman in family and society, but that doesn’t undermine the perennial wisdom that can be mined from his writings.

Today’s teaching about anger and forgiveness is good for the playground, an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, or a session on restorative justice. The first thing to notice is that Sirach focuses not on the wrongdoer and his or her criminality but on the one who is offended. Sirach tells the angry victim that she must make a choice. She was injured once. Now, if she holds to that anger, the injury will become a major factor defining her life. She will end up hugging anger and wrath and having no room in her arms for anything more valuable and life-giving.

Ben Sira warns the person bent on vengeance that each of us participates in creating the world conditions in which we will live. One cannot both nourish anger and look for healing and forgiveness from God. Ben Sira is saying, “Face it, you can only receive what you are willing to give. So, be careful!”

Toward the end of the reading, Ben Sira offers a somber and solid technique for discerning what is important. “Remember your last days ... remember death and decay.” A day is coming when all you can do is look back and ask yourself, “Did I make it worthwhile?” Thinking of that day, Ben Sira says “set enmity aside” because

you are building the reality you will face in your own final days. As today's Gospel parable will point out, the mercy sought by a pitiless person is only a scam.

## **ROMANS 14:7-9**

Paul's message in this selection of Romans follows up directly on the end of the reading from Sirach. Sirach says, remember you are going to die so live with that in mind. Paul says we neither live nor die for ourselves alone, but for the Lord.

On one level, we can hear this teaching as the inspiration of John Dunne's poem "No Man is an Island," as it reminds us that we are all part of one another in Christ. Dunne's meditation expresses a deep appreciation of the fact that all our gifts are for the common good, and all suffering is somehow shared. It leads to the realization that both loneliness and jealousy spring from isolation and lack of gratitude. Dunne expresses his awareness of humanity's essential unity most memorably in the line: "Send not to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee."

What Dunne says coincides with what modern science has come to understand about the connectedness of all reality. The bells toll for species and glaciers as well as for the elderly woman down the block and the drowned refugee child. Then too, every sunrise and growing blade of grass participates in what E. E. Cummings called, "the birth day of life and of love and wings" ("I thank you God for this most amazing").

Paul's message goes beyond those poetic visions of the unity of all creation. Pope Francis expressed this for our times in his encyclical, "*Laudato Si'*, on Care for Our Common Home." Reflecting on human life he said:

The sheer novelty involved in the emergence of a personal being within a material universe presupposes a direct action of God and a particular call to life and to relationship on the part of a 'Thou' who addresses himself to another 'thou.' (#81)

That's Francis' commentary on Paul's statement "None of us lives for oneself." Francis goes on to say:

The ultimate purpose of other creatures is not to be found in us. Rather, all ... are moving forward with us and through us towards a common point of arrival which is God ... where the risen Christ embraces and illumines all things. Human beings, endowed with intelligence and love, and drawn by the fullness of Christ, are called

to lead all creatures back to their Creator. (#83)

How better to say, “If we live, we live for the Lord, and if we die, we die for the Lord”?

## **MATTHEW 18:21-35**

Today’s Gospel takes us into the humorous heart of Jesus the storyteller and teacher. The fact that the incident opens with a question from Peter gives us advance notice that we’re about to hear the most sincere and blundering of disciples open the door for Jesus to launch into another of his stories that stick.

Picking up from last week, Jesus is teaching his disciples about the community’s responsibility for seeking and reconciling the lost. Perhaps Peter was hoping to help his teacher with a set-up question: “How often must I forgive?” Then, to give Jesus ample room to congratulate him for his perception and generosity, he asks, “Seven times?” Seven wasn’t just a number he pulled out of his headdress. Seven was Peter’s way of demonstrating uncommon generosity. Offering to forgive seven times was like saying, “I’ll put up with anything if that’s what you suggest.” Jesus doubles down on him and replies, “Not just seven, my friend, but seventy-seven ... forever and ever, Amen!” (That’s a free interpretation of Jesus’ exaggerated number of seventy-seven.)

Peter’s numbers game offered Jesus the take-off point for a story about how things get worked out in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus invites his hearers to imagine such a fantastic world of affluence that Bill Gates would feel like a country store clerk amid this crowd of characters. When it came to describing the sums of money involved, hyperbole was the name of the game. Our translation has turned the original 10,000 talents into “a huge amount.” Just to get a sense of what “huge” means, we start with the fact that a talent was the weight a soldier could carry on his back, something between 75 and 100 pounds. Jesus doesn’t specify if these talents were silver or gold, but people got the idea. Now how many talents were owed? The word translated as “huge” is 10,000, which wasn’t meant to be literal, it was simply the highest number calculable in those days. We would probably say “a gazillion.” Now, the audience was really getting the picture. If the debtor, “Mr. D,” had shown up ready to pay, he would have arrived accompanied by a parade of a gazillion servants, each weighed down by someone else’s wealth. (Whose wealth it really was is a question for the ethicists.)

It goes without saying that Mr. D had no way to pay it off. Even so, he made a show of asking for just a little more time. The master, endowed with a heart even bigger than his fortune, wrote off the loan. So far, the parable has set up a world in which the forgiveness of such an immense fortune makes it look as if anything is possible. It's jubilee time! But, just as the audience pictured the relieved debtor dancing down the road to home, Jesus began narrating the second act of the drama.

Now those who had seen or heard what had happened to Mr. D are watching to see what he does next. How is he going to celebrate his good fortune? He hunted down one of his own debtors. This fellow owed him 100 denarii, the equivalent of 100 days wages — a pretty significant amount to somebody who didn't have hordes of money hidden at home, but a full 600,000 times less than Mr. D had owed the master.

Happy face erased, Mr. D grabs the guy by the neck. As if he had been listening in while Mr. D performed before the master, the guy steals Mr. D's lines, but his pitiful plea for compassion has no effect on its original author. Mr. D wants nothing more than his money. Proving that he has no idea of what mercy is, he sends the unfortunate fellow to prison.

In the end, Mr. D gets what's coming to him, or perhaps better said, Mr. D ends up in the world he has created. He was offered an alternative, but he wouldn't pay 100 denarii for a world of mercy.

Peter asked Jesus how many times community members were expected to forgive one another. Jesus told them a tall tale that asked them what kind of world they wanted to create and what it was worth to them. The person who counts the number of times they will pardon another is not forgiving but keeping score.

## **Planning: 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time**

By: Lawrence Mick

This Sunday is designated as Catechetical Sunday in the United States. It's a day to affirm and support all those who carry out catechetical ministry in the parish, ranging from those who teach the very young to those who provide catechesis in the catechumenate to those who offer spiritual formation for the elderly. It's also a day to simply recognize the importance of ongoing catechesis for every member of the church, since God calls us all to continual growth.

Planners should consult with catechetical leaders in the parish to determine how to recognize catechists this weekend. (Materials are available online: **[www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/how-we-teach/catechesis/catechetical-sunday](http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/how-we-teach/catechesis/catechetical-sunday)**).

An order for blessing catechists can be found in Chapter 4 of the *Book of Blessings*; the order to use within Mass starts at #504. Note that the prayer of blessing can be used at the end of the General Intercessions or at the end of Mass (#508).

The theme for this year is “Living as Missionary Disciples,” another reminder that spreading the message of the Gospel is a responsibility of all members of the church, not just those who are formal catechists. While there are times when that means we need to speak openly to others about our faith, we also spread the Gospel by the way we live.

Today’s readings suggest a focus on forgiveness as a critical catechetical challenge and as a powerful witness to our faith. Is there any doubt that there is a crying need for forgiveness in today’s society? So many are focused on revenge rather than forgiveness! Christians could (and should) be people known for mercy, for forgiveness, for reconciliation, for peace. Wouldn’t that draw people to Christ?

A key insight is that forgiveness is as valuable to the one forgiving as it is to the one forgiven. As the first reading puts it: “Wrath and anger are hateful things, yet the sinner hugs them tight.” Holding on to anger and refusing to forgive destroys the peace and joy of the one who does not forgive. Often it hurts that person even more than the person they need to forgive. Helping people to see this truth does not make forgiving easy, but it may help people decide to keep trying to forgive more quickly and more often.

As you craft petitions for this weekend and choose music for the Masses, look for ways to invite people to seek the joy of reconciliation. That might begin by lifting up God’s constant willingness to forgive, which gives us both the model and the reason to learn to forgive, in turn.

This might also be a good week for an autumn penance service, especially if you have not celebrated one since Lent.

## **Prayers: 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time**

By: Joan DeMerchant

## **Introduction**

Today's readings address an all-too-familiar piece of advice that is easier to talk about than to do: Forgive. We know from experience how hard it is to forgive and how powerful it is to be forgiven. That Jesus was even asked about it indicates that it is not a behavior enacted easily. His response reflects our need to be instructed about it. Forgiveness is not usually our first response to real or perceived hurts or injustices, and it may require our commitment to live as totally new people in Christ. But, boundless forgiveness may be the greatest gift we can ever give one another — and ourselves.

## **Penitential Act**

- Lord Jesus, you told Peter that we must forgive one another without limit: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you showed him and us the depth of God's mercy: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you call us to the same depth and breadth of forgiveness: Lord, have mercy.

## **Prayer of the Faithful**

**Presider** Let us pray, my friends, for all who need to forgive or be forgiven.

**Minister** For the church: That it may always seek, as well as grant, forgiveness ... we pray,

- For those responsible for peacemaking in our nation and throughout the world ... we pray,
- For families who experience brokenness and are in need of mutual forgiveness ... we pray,
- For pastors, catechists, and all who prepare people for the sacrament of penance ... we pray,
- For those who have been unable to forgive or who perceive forgiveness as weakness...we pray.
- For those in positions of authority who do not know how to ask for forgiveness ... we pray,

- For the most vulnerable among us, especially the unjustly maligned or persecuted, the belittled or betrayed, the abused or forgotten ... we pray,
- For all who are in any kind of need in this community, especially the sick, the dying and the grieving ... we pray,

**Presider** O God, you have shown us through Jesus that forgiveness has no bounds. Give us the humility to ask for forgiveness when we have injured one another and the generosity to forgive those whom we have injured. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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