

NO LIMITS TO FORGIVENESS

The preacher was preaching on “Forgive Your Enemies.” After a long sermon, he asked how many were willing to forgive their enemies. About half held up their hands. Not satisfied he harangued on for another twenty minutes and repeated his question. This time he got a response of about 80%. Still unsatisfied, he went on for another 15 minutes and repeated his question.

With all thoughts now on Sunday dinner, all raised their hands except one little old lady in the back. “Mrs. Jones, aren’t you willing to forgive your enemies?”

“I don’t have any,” she replied.

“Mrs. Jones, this is very unusual. How old are you?”

“Ninety seven.”

“Mrs. Jones, could you please come down to the front and tell the congregation how a person could live to be 97 and not have an enemy in the world?”

The little sweetheart of a lady tottered down the aisle, slowly turned around and said, “It’s easy. I just outlived the old witches.”

Peter had a question about forgiveness. Good old impetuous Peter has a way of asking what everyone wants to know but is afraid to ask. “Lord, this forgiveness stuff may be fine, but what are the limits of forgiveness? Let’s be practical here.”

The Law suggested seven times.

And Jesus’ answer is that there are no limits to forgiveness, just as there are no limits to love. Forgiveness is not so much an act, with a beginning and an end, as it is a discovery, an attitude, a state of mind.

On October 7, Archbishop Desmond Tutu will turn 87. Ann and I had the great honor of spending six weeks in Cape Town with Tutu just before the first election in which blacks could vote. Tutu’s stand in the face of the cruel racism of apartheid won him the Nobel Peace Prize. His current book on joy, written with the Dalai Lama, is on the best-seller list. He also wrote a book about his experiences under apartheid and with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a book entitled *No Future Without Forgiveness*. No future

without forgiveness. Most people believe that without Tutu's leadership of that Truth and Reconciliation Commission, South Africa would have descended into a racial bloodbath.

All of us have trouble with forgiveness. After all, we're only human. All of us experience deep hurts which really do test us down to the depths of our being. We probably all know someone – maybe you're that someone --who carries the grim burden of not being able to forgive – perhaps an ex-spouse or a victim of a shady business deal, or anyone who carries a real or imagined grievance, and who radiates such bitterness and hatred that people cross to the other side of the street when they see them coming.

St. Mary's has recently been through some difficult times, and some people have been unable or unwilling to forgive some of the circumstances.

What Jesus is saying is that we should be perpetually forgiving because we ourselves are perpetually in need of forgiveness. As we say in the Lord's Prayer, we can only experience forgiveness as we are willing to forgive others.

Let me suggest three points about forgiveness. First of all, Jesus is our example. The life of Jesus is the story of a person who suffered humiliation, misunderstanding, abandonment, betrayal, physical and spiritual pain – and yet who forgave. Over and over, Jesus forgave. Even the disciples, Jesus' closest friends, deserted him at the time of his deepest need, even denied they knew him. Yet Jesus forgave them, told parables about forgiveness like the one we just heard, and most importantly, practiced what he preached, praying on the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

The first point about forgiveness, then, is that Jesus is our example.

The second point about forgiveness is that Jesus always initiated the act. He didn't wait for the other person to come to him. Instead time and time again Jesus reached out and extended the gift of forgiveness before anyone even asked for it.

In matters of forgiveness, the question usually arises of who goes first. To someone who's been deeply hurt, it frequently appears as though forgiveness is letting the other person off the hook. Victims usually agree that -- OK, if that person who hurt me acknowledges what he or she did, says they're sorry, and asks for forgiveness, it won't be easy but at least I might be able to forgive them. Absolutely -- the offender, the other guy,

should make the first move.

But -- the Gospel has it the other way around. The Gospel proposes that forgiveness begin with the victim, with the person wronged. With you. Forgiveness begins with the victim.

We saw that certainly on the national level in South Africa, when Archbishop Tutu and Nelson Mandela, the victims of the apartheid policies of the white nationalist government, led the movement for truth and reconciliation.

As we begin a new year with a new rector at St. Mary's, let's keep in mind Fr. David's theme for the year: "Behold, I make all things new." Let's leave the hurt and the bad stuff in the past, where it belongs, because after all no one can change the past. As a friend of ours used to say, "What's was is was." And let's move ahead into what promises to be an exciting future.

And then the third point about forgiveness is that there's no easy forgiveness. I think that's obvious to anyone who's been wronged – there's no easy forgiveness. It takes honesty, sweat, and tears, therapy sometimes, and prayer. Forgiveness is a decision, just as love is a decision. You and I can only forgive from a deep spiritual place. We can't do it alone – we can only forgive by the grace of God, knowing that no matter how badly we were hurt we can't change what happened. It's in the past. Even God can't rewrite history. Do we want to keep carrying that gunny-sack of hurt around with us, or do we want to get rid of it and start afresh.

Forgive yourself. Forgive others.

"Lord, how often should I forgive?" "Not seven times, but seventy-seven times."

There are no limits to forgiveness.

Let me share a powerful poem from Alice Walker --

Looking down into my father's

dead face

for the last time

my mother said

without tears, without smiles

just with civility

'Goodnight, Willie Lee,

I'll see you in the morning.'

And it was then I knew

that the healing of all our wounds

is forgiveness

that permits a promise of our return

at the end