

HOMILY SUNDAY 24 – A (Homily 02)

“Forgiving from the Heart”

(Sirach 27:30-28:7; Psalm 103; Romans 14:7-9; Matthew 18:21-25)

An elderly woman had just returned to her home from an evening church service when she was startled by an intruder. She caught the man in the act of robbing her home of its valuables and yelled, “Stop! Acts 2:38!” which reads, “Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven.” The burglar stopped in his tracks and the woman calmly called the police and explained what she had done. As the officer cuffed the man to take him in, he asked the burglar, “Why did you just stand there? All the old lady did was yell out a scripture passage to you.” “Scripture?” replied the burglar. “She said she had an axe and two 38’s!”

Like a movie that continues a previous theme, the readings today continue to drive home the message from the past few Sundays, on the importance of forgiveness, and forgiving from the heart.

The Old Testament reading from the book of Sirach is surprisingly similar in tone to the teachings of the New Testament. One would almost think it was taken from the teachings of Jesus himself. Sirach reminds us of the commandment to love, and basically identifies love with the ability to forgive anyone who has offended us. He also teaches us that forgiveness is the ability to let go of any desire for revenge or retaliation. We are reminded that the basic reason for forgiveness is that we are in a covenant relationship with a God who is forgiveness, who has forgiven us and now expects us to forgive others. This Old Testament teaching is also a good reflection of the *Our Father* prayer in its teaching on forgiveness.

In the Gospel, Peter’s question is very reasonable. How many times should one forgive? Peter thinks he is very generous in his suggestion of seven times. Seven is after all a perfect number for the Jewish people, and Peter probably thinks he will get some merit points from Jesus for being so magnanimous.

Instead, Jesus takes the teaching about the importance of forgiving to a whole new level, beyond anything Peter would ever have imagined. To forgive seventy seven times seven is to never stop trying to forgive. Forgiveness is what following Jesus, who is the forgiveness of God, is all about.

The parable that Jesus recounts of the unforgiving servant, illustrates not so much

the importance of restoring one's debt or forgiving a debt, as it is a teaching about the importance of sharing with others the forgiveness that we have already received from God, which is an infinite amount, as God is infinitely good.

Jesus adds an important admonition that we must forgive from the heart. Our forgiveness must be sincere, genuine and heart-felt. We must let go of any desire for revenge, retaliation, or getting even.

The reason for that is articulated by St. Paul in the second reading to the Romans. In an almost poetic fashion, St. Paul describes our relationship with Jesus Christ: "If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's." To belong to the Lord, who is forgiveness, the very forgiveness of God in the flesh, then, we must forgive from the heart as he has forgiven us.

Anne, who did not like her brother-in-law, John, criticized the way he was noisily eating his soup at the dinner table. He abruptly got up, walked out and went for a ride on his motorcycle. Her brother, who witnessed this incident, quietly remarked to her that she had obviously hurt his feelings. Anne tried to justify herself with the comment that one was supposed to confront someone who was doing something wrong. To which her brother replied, "Perhaps, but that would be better done in private, not in public in a shaming way." She started to cry, and her brother consoled her with the suggestion that she could always ask for his forgiveness. John returned somewhat later, and sat down at the table again to finish his meal. Anne leaned to her brother and whispered if it would be okay to do that then. He whispered back that yes, it would be appropriate as she had embarrassed him in public. She then said to him, "I am sorry if I offended you." John replied gruffly, "That's all right – I have already forgotten it." However, in the car on the way back home afterwards with her brother, he was swearing, fuming, full of anger and insinuating all kinds of hurtful things he would like to inflict upon her. It was obvious that he had not forgiven at all. Certainly he was not living out the readings for today.

The Eucharist that we now celebrate together is an experience of the responsorial psalm, which reminds us that God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. That love is made present to us now through Word, Sacrament and forgiveness.

May we be strengthened by this celebration to be true to the commandments, to forgive those who hurt us, and to do so from the heart.

