

By Father Charles Bowes

Sirach 27:30-28:7
Roman 14:7-9
Matthew 18:21-35

We do not condone or excuse – we forgive.

This parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18 comes at the end of an extensive teaching by Jesus on the theme of healing relationships. Now Peter approaches Jesus with a question about the number of times forgiveness should be extended to another. It is highly significant that Peter is the one to ask the question.

Later in the gospel, after his three-fold denial of the Lord, Peter will be in a position to fully appreciate the kind of forgiveness that has no limits. The apostle must have regarded his own proposal of seven times as quite generous. Perhaps he expected Jesus to express astonishment at such an extravagant display of mercy. If so, Peter must have been completely taken by surprise when Jesus multiplies his own extravagant number by seventy. Jesus insists that his followers should not even think of counting the number of times they forgive others. Some Jewish leaders of the day wanted clearly defined limits on the obligation to forgive. Certain rabbis interpreted the prophet Amos, Chapter 2, as indicating God's own forgiveness for an offense was limited to four times...but Jesus' response of seventy times seven is a reversal of the passage in

Genesis Chapter 4 where Lamech boasts of seventy-sevenfold revenge. Here Jesus reverses the spirit of unlimited retaliation and speaks instead of unlimited pardon.

Forgiveness is often confused with excusing and condoning. Excusing passes over a mistake without asking punishment - as when an ex-spouse is allowed to get away without paying the child support because he or she just isn't able to hold a job. Forgiveness does not overlook the offense, though it does not dwell on it. Condoning overlooks an offense in a way that gives a tacit pardon - as when a parent chooses not to address the consistent inappropriate behavior of children in their care. Forgiving, on the other hand, is not a tacit but a clear and unambiguous pardon - as has been attempted in the trials in South Africa dealing with those who committed the atrocities of apartheid - wherein people are held accountable but not imprisoned. Forgiveness is not as simple as refusal to hold people accountable for their actions; it is rather a fully responsible action that can truly right a wrong. It is not a pious refusal to engage the offender, but a deep engagement that aims for a rebuilding of the shattered relationship.

But it is so hard to do...this business of forgiving. In some ways forgiveness is very close to forgetting. It is a refusal to try to hold on to the offense. It always

acknowledges that the offense occurred and, as it were, lets it go. It remembers more the healing than the injury. It celebrates more the renewal than what was taken away or harmed.

Yet in our parable of Matthew 18, the good ruler that has just pardoned the offense a moment before, now reinstates it with a vengeance - what happened to "seventy times seven times?" The king's sentencing of the first debtor to torture doesn't seem so very forgiving - especially after only one failing.

The key is that the failing is radical unforgiveness. It's as if the refusal to forgive, by its very nature, locks us into a torturous circle. So tightly closed against pardoning the other, we have sealed ourselves off from the very experience of pardon.

It is hard to believe God could forgive endlessly. We surely would not. Forgive again and again and again? We think that if we forgive too easily, people - our children, our spouses, our friends, our enemies - will walk all over us. We offer ourselves more "realistic" counsel. "I'll forgive, maybe once, or if they forgive me first, or if there is some promise of change, or if they don't do it again, or if they acknowledge their sin."

But such a tactic leads to a tortured soul. The weight of unforgiven hurt binds and burdens us. We carry grudges like clinkers, burnt up and cold. The great tragedy is that if we wish to exempt ourselves from the law of Jesus, the law of love and forgiveness; if we establish for ourselves a new reality, if vengeance and retribution are what we embrace as most true and reliable, then that is what we are left with. Hell is not so much God's punishment of us as it is the result that our punishment of each other demands.

When it comes to forgiveness, we tend to get it backward. We think God forgives us only *if* we first confess our sins. We think we forgive one who wrongs us only *if* - if that person first apologizes or confesses, to us. But we learn from Matthew 18 that forgiveness is not a matter of *if* but a matter of *because*. God forgives because it is God's nature to do so, because God created, redeemed and daily loves us so. We forgive *because* God forgives. The master punishes the unforgiving servant *because* that servant does not forgive. We forgive not because it strikes us as right, fair, appropriate, or helpful, but because God forgives. Forgiveness is not a matter of *if*; it's a matter of *because*.

This holy food is open to all of us - the same amount for each regardless of our degree of sinfulness or worth - none of which counts here. When Jews gather on the feast of Yom Kippur, the first sentence of their liturgy is: "It is hereby decreed, that it is permissible for sinners to be part of the congregation."

**We can say the same thing here
because we do not condone or
excuse, we forgive.**