

Homily for September 8, 2002
23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time Cycle A

By Father Charles Bowes

Ezekiel 33:7-9
Romans 13:8-10
Matthew 18:15-20

Forgiveness is something that God does through us.

“Amen, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven,” says Jesus in Matthew 18. Sound familiar?

Just a couple of weeks ago we heard the same words addressed to Peter along with, “and I shall give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven.” Two weeks ago we heard the power of binding and loosing seemingly delegated to just one figure, the Pope. Today that power is delegated to the entire community – to all of us. God knows we have ample need to deal with forgiveness, since this week marks the first anniversary of the destruction of so many lives in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania – our national tragedy. It is one thing for a single individual to forgive another. It is quite another for whole peoples to forgive or to move toward reconciliation.

As I look back toward last year’s tragedy, I think both of love and of horror. In trying to make sense of it, I’m drawn to the words of a Cardinal from Belgium, Godfried Danneels, who visited what he called “the gaping pit at Ground Zero,” and likened it to the wound in the side of Christ from which blood and water flowed, grace and redemption. He wrote, “The place of

evil, suffering and death is also the sight of generosity, heroism and determination...the names and faces of those who ran toward danger to save others will not be forgotten. Those men and women proved in an instant that instinctive heroism is not a fantasy. That great good is already an evident outcome of the tragedy.”

But how do we forgive? How do we exercise the forgiveness the early church saw coming from the hand of Jesus Christ? I find that a story I used at one of the two services we held last year at this time is still instructive of both the struggle and the reward of forgiveness – a kind of heroism spoken of by Cardinal Danneels.

The renowned lecturer and concentration camp survivor, Corrie ten-Boom, described her struggle with bestowing forgiveness. She wrote, “I had just given a talk to a large group when suddenly, there before me and coming toward me, I recognized a man who had been one of the guards at the concentration camp where I had been imprisoned, one of those responsible for all that was vile and hateful and oppressive and death-dealing. As he made his way in the line to meet me, I said to myself and to my God, ‘There is no way I can touch that man, forgive that man – no way – do not ask this of me, O God.’ And in an instant I had a sense of God speaking and saying, ‘No, you cannot

forgive him, nor do I ask you to forgive him. But let me forgive him through you.” And with that inspiration, Corrie ten-Boom found herself able to reach out and take his hand in hers.

If we are not able to forgive our enemies, then we ask that God forgive them through us. To do that, God will have to make us into His creation, imbue us with His Spirit. In this way the Lord’s empowerment of each of us to forgive and the reality of that forgiveness in the face of hatred can begin to become one.

As yet another step toward dealing with the events of last September 11th, a number of churches in our area are gathering this Wednesday evening at 7:00 p.m. at Macedonia Living Word Church, near the corner of West Kemper Road and Route 4. Each month the ministerial group I’m in meets there, and this is our combined effort to pray together. There’s more information in today’s bulletin and posted on our church doors.

“Lord, how were you able to forgive your enemies?” That’s my prayer to God through Jesus flowing from this gospel and upon this anniversary. In the ensuing silence may God give answer and direction.

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