

Purgatory & Forgiveness
24th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Mt 18:21-35)

I once had parishioners whose house was burglarized. They lost some of their possessions, but the damage done by the burglar went much deeper. I'll never forget visiting them after it happened, and especially the children. Even if all their things were recovered and the burglar was in jail, that still wouldn't make up for the damage done in their lives. Their personal security had been attacked. The sanctity of their home-life had been violated. The peace and stability of their family, which is represented by the home, was harmed. This is something the burglar can never pay for, because it's not something that can be measured by a fine, or a jail sentence.

If this is true of the damage caused against our fellow man, how much more serious is the damage caused in our relationship with God? Every sin committed against our neighbor damages us before God. If we can't even undo the damage caused to our neighbour, how can we possibly hope to undo the harm we cause our soul before God the Father?

The truth is, we cannot. We are merely creatures, and we cannot make the infinite satisfaction to God which our sins require. And yet justice requires that the debt be paid. Jesus shows us the way. It is forgiveness.

Forgiveness doesn't mean justice goes unpaid. It means the one offended pays the debt by writing it off for the other. The offended party suffers the loss incurred by the offender's sin.

When that family forgave the burglar (who was never caught) it didn't mean that the suffering and loss went away. It meant that they fully acknowledged the horrible crime, and accepted that injury as a sacrifice offered to God for sin: their own sins, and the sins of others. By this act they imitate Jesus, who paid the price for all sin, even though he was sinless. And even though they suffered loss, by this act of forgiveness the family was able to move forward with God's help, in peace and trust, without the additional burdens of vengeance and hate.

The burglar will still have to answer to God for his crime, but when it comes time for this family to answer to God for *their* sins, Jesus the judge will not hesitate to forgive their failings, recognizing the cost they paid in forgiving the burglar.

We cannot escape justice. In the end we will have to pay for our crimes, because our God is a just God. But as long as we have time on earth, through the merits of Jesus' Cross, we can have those debts paid now. And we do so

by practicing forgiveness. This is the message of the Gospel parable today: if you forgive the human debts owed by your fellow man, then God will be prepared to forgive the Divine debt owed to Him at the final judgment. Jesus taught us to pray this way in the Our Father: *“Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”*

Jesus has found us a way back to heaven through mercy, without denying justice. His way hinges our salvation on the way we forgive others. So, when Peter asks how many times he must forgive his brother, Jesus tells him he can't ask that. If he is going to measure his love by counting it in this way, justice will require God to do the same. But if Peter will not count up others' crimes against him and instead forgive them wholeheartedly, God binds Himself to do the same, because that is what love is.

So, during this life we have the opportunity to pay our infinite debt toward God, through Jesus Christ. We do it by forgiving our brother from the heart, taking the loss we suffer to Jesus and uniting it with his own sacrifice on the Cross. In other words, by getting on the Cross with him and loving sinners as he does, we find the path to heaven avoiding judgment.

Those saints who make full use of the life God gives them can come before their God with full confidence at the time of death. Through a life lived in union with Christ, they are able to enter heaven in perfect holiness.

For those people who never sought to live the life of Jesus, and love and forgive as he did, who respond with wrath and vengeance to people who crossed their way, who were never humble enough to forgive; at the moment of their death they come before God with an infinite debt, and a justice to be satisfied, but no means to do so. Once our life is over, our ability to atone for sin is over. For these souls there is condemnation on the day of judgement.

But what about those who follow Christ, and yet do so imperfectly? Who die not having made perfect use of this life, whose love and forgiveness when it came to other people was not total as Jesus insists? For them, coming into God's presence is not like the condemned, where hope and love are dead, and the fire is eternal. But it is not like the saints either, who immediately or very quickly rest in peace in the bosom of the Father. For them death is painful and difficult, and requires a final purification.

God's presence is painful precisely because they *do* have love, but their love is so far short of the generosity which is seen in the vision of God. It is the pain caused by recognizing how great God is in His mercy, and yet how stingy or hesitant the soul was in forgiving others.

Purgatory is a suffering caused by recognizing what bad use one made of so many opportunities on earth to live with the love of God, shown us in Jesus. Purgatory is a terrible suffering, because having died there is nothing more one can do to atone and change things. Yet it is not like the suffering of Hell, because Purgatory is the suffering caused by love and mercy, whereas Hell is the suffering caused by absence of Love and mercy.

Purgatory is not a third place between heaven and hell. Purgatory the painful process of “going to heaven” for a soul which loved weakly and imperfectly, and failed to forgive wholeheartedly. In God’s presence there can only be perfect love, because God is perfect love. And until love is purified and made perfect like Christ’s, to look directly at God will be painful.

With Christ’s help it is possible for us to forgive. It is never easy. It doesn’t seem fair. But it’s necessary for salvation. It is the only path to peace, the only way we can come before God and be able to stay there.