

“So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you **forgives** your brother or sister from your heart.”

Over the years with the help of others – I have reflected on the fact that **forgiveness** is different than **reconciliation**. . . I don’t know if you have ever thought about this before – because I think we usually consider them to be the same thing – but they’re not.

Just by looking in the dictionary (if you still know what one of those are) we find that forgiveness is:

- 1) to excuse for a fault or offense, to pardon. And
- 2) to renounce anger or resentment against.

Forgiveness comes from the Greek word which means “to let go of –or- to leave behind.”

Forgiveness is something that can take place completely within ourselves. I can forgive you – without you even knowing I have forgiven you – although hopefully you should notice a difference in the way I treat you --- like a Gentile or a tax collector: I pray for you, I love you, and I desire nothing but the best for you. . .

Forgiveness is a choice I make. If you have hurt me – and I am angry - I can choose to carry that anger with me – Or I can renounce the anger – I can let go of it. The other choice is that I hold on to it – and do what we considered last week – I can take my anger out on someone else – by yelling and screaming and kicking the dog – pounding on something – or growling at others. . . I’m sure we have all had the experience before – someone taking out their anger on us – when we had nothing to do with a situation – and so are left standing there wondering – what was that all about?? Forgiveness is releasing the offending person from the debt we feel they owe us – because of what they have done, and turning loose of the negative feelings.

Now, if I don’t forgive – then those negative feelings stew within me – and it may so drain and distract me – that I cannot concentrate on or do anything else. That is why forgiveness is so often said to be a gift to ourselves – more than to the person who has wronged us. Now, I can release my anger and pain – I can forgive someone – and then walk off, without carrying on any more contact with that person. But that’s usually NOT how things are done in the family of God. . .

Forgiveness provides the solid foundation on which reconciliation is built.

If we don’t forgive someone first – then we are coming at them with all the pain, and anger, and hurt we’re carrying --- *and that usually results in a not-to-pretty scene* – and chances are there will never be reconciliation.

Again, if we look in the dictionary – reconciliation is defined as: 1)to re-establish a relationship. Or 2) to settle or resolve a dispute.

Reconciliation comes from a Greek word which means “to change” or “to exchange.” Through reconciliation – we change a relationship in which there was anger pain and hurt – and re-establish the relationship in a more positive and life-giving manner. We EXCHANGE negative thoughts and feelings – with more positive thoughts and feelings. IT IS NOT POSSIBLE for me to reconcile myself with you --- all by myself, as I can with forgiveness. Just as it takes two to tango, as the saying goes – it takes at least two to reconcile.

You might want to remember all of this when you’re talking with our protestant brothers and sisters who have difficulty with our Sacrament of Reconciliation ---- and notice that it is the Sacrament of RECONCILIATION – not forgiveness. Because we can walk in the woods and ask God’s forgiveness --- or offer our forgiveness to someone else --- but we cannot ask for reconciliation for ourselves – that’s the community part of our Sacrament – we need a representative of the community or of God – to achieve reconciliation – this re-establishing of relationship.

I like adapting a story Stephen Covey of “the 7 Habits of highly effective people” uses.

If you are out walking in the woods and a poisonous rattlesnake bites you – **forgiveness** would be like sucking out the poison – to keep it from harming you. BUT THERE IS STILL A POISONOUS RATTLESNAKE OUT IN THE WOODS! Now we can just avoid walking in the woods for the rest of our lives – or we have to choose to deal with the snake – either by killing it or permanently disarming its poison. **RECONCILIATION** is when we choose to deal with the snake – rather than avoid it.

Now back to our Gospel: “Peter asks: ‘lord, is my brother or sister sins against me, how often must I forgive? As many as seven times?’ Jesus answered, “I say to you, not seven times but seventy-seven times.” Jesus is saying we should never tire of sucking out the poison of anger and hurt and resentment in our lives. If we choose to hang on to that stuff --- it will be the death of us, relationally and spiritually.

But we, in the family of God, cannot stop merely with the poison – we also have to deal with the snake – rather than avoid it – we are called to be ministers of reconciliation: If our brother or sister has sinned against us – we go and tell them their fault. If they don’t listen to us, then we ask other people to help us resolve the difference. If that brother or sister still refuses to listen – we bring it to the Church – which means we all lift that person up in prayer, and we all work together to resolve the difference – with our community, within the body of Christ – with compassion, and with mercy. If the person refuses to listen even to the wisdom of the community – then we treat them as we would a Gentile or a tax collector – which, in the family of God – means we still pray for them, we still love them, and desire the best for them.

I sometimes joke with myself that if I have to love someone anyway – then I might as well do my best to get along with them!

THIS IS NOT EASY STUFF! It's certainly a cross that Jesus told us several weeks ago – we must take up – if we want to follow him. And perhaps that's why – more than anything else we pray for-- in the actual words of the Mass – we pray for peace – that we can be in harmony with one another.

The word peace is used 7 times just between the Our Father and our reception of Communion! Right before we symbolize our unity – that we are the very body of Christ – we pray for peace again, and again, and again – listen for it today.

And through the liturgy, especially the Our Father – we pray for forgiveness. Not just that we may be forgiven – but that we might become forgivers.

And even though we are several months from Christmas – although we are half-way through Ordinary Time, though --- perhaps we need to remember also – we do call Jesus the prince of peace.

That through him with him and in him:

Through HIS example of love, and with HIS example of forgiveness, mercy, and peace – and in HIS grace and help: we might become more like him.