Our Sunday Readings

Forgive

SIRACH 27:30 – 28:7

Reading closely

1. Why do people cling to anger?
2. How might the LORD take vengeance on the vengeful?
3. What might the prayer of a vengeful person sound like?
4. What might the prayer of a person who's struggling to forgive sound like?
5. Why is it foolish for the unforgiving person to expect mercy from God?
6. How could remembering *death and decay* help a person to let go of anger and forgive?
7. What *commandments* might the author have in mind (v.7)?
8. How might thinking of God's *covenant* help someone to forgive?

Living the word

9. How readily do you forgive others?
10. Are there any injustices that you find unforgivable?
11. How does long-held anger affect a person?
12. Do you tend to think of God as forgiving you or as holding you strictly accountable for your sins?

THE FIRST READING

Guide to the moral life

The Book of Sirach is also called the Wisdom of ben Sira (son of Sirach) and The Book of Ecclesiasticus (from the Greek word for *church*). The book was written in the second century BC, so Jews ultimately considered it too recent a work to include in their list of sacred scriptures.

However, this book was widely used in the early church, especially for instructing those who were new to the Christian faith. As passages like this one show, the work contains good guidance on how to live as God intends.

Vengeance kills

The author echoes the Jewish law, expressed in passages like Leviticus 19:17-18: "You shall not bear hatred for your brother..." To do otherwise is to disobey God, who alone is judge.

The author reminds us that as mortals we depend entirely on God to sustain our lives (vv.5-6). If we bear hatred toward others, we implicitly tell God, who is love itself, that we don't want to be part of eternal life with him.

MATTHEW 18:21-35

1. What might have prompted Peter's question?
2. Do you think the disciples were ever angry at each other?
3. Place yourself in the parable.
   If you were the master...
   a. Why do you plan to sell your indebted servant and everything connected to him?
   b. Why do you forgive the loan rather than give the servant more time to pay it back?
   c. Do you have any misgivings about forgiving the entire debt?
   d. What do you feel when you hear how the servant treated someone indebted to him?
   e. What will happen to that servant once he goes to the torturers?

   If you were the first servant...
   f. How did you accumulate such a large debt?
   g. What do you think of your master?
   h. How do you feel when your debt is erased?
   i. What all runs through your mind when you attack the man indebted to you?
   j. How do you react when your master finds you and has you arrested?
4. What might the disciples have said to one another privately about this story?
5. What does the parable teach you about yourself?
6. What does the parable reveal about God?
7. How does this passage challenge you?

THE GOSPEL READING

Setting limits

Peter wants rules about how much to forgive. Jesus replies that forgiveness is the rule. Given the teaching right before this one, however, it seems that Jesus is telling us to forgive someone who repents. He also wants us to pray in order to know how to respond to a persistent sinner (vv.19-20).

Lamech

In Genesis 4:23-24 a man (Lamech) declares that if anyone hurts him he will take revenge "seventy-fold," which means that his revenge is limitless. Jesus opposes such endless vengeance. His followers must be like God, whose mercy is without limit. If we want to be part of God's kingdom, we must imitate God who reigns over it.

Community glue

This passage is the last one in a section on how to be church (18:1-35). By placing it at the end, Matthew emphasizes the necessity of forgiveness. People sin and make mistakes. If we hold grudges against each other, our faith community won't survive.

Change of heart

The parable doesn't quite fit Peter's question. It doesn't describe forgiving someone many times but forgiving them on a large scale. The debt of the first servant is so great that he couldn't have ever repaid it. The second servant owes an amount that could be repaid.

Although the situation of the first servant changed, the servant himself did not. When his debt was forgiven, he did not embrace his experience of mercy. Because he didn't share the forgiveness he received, he lost it. The story warns us that God's forgiveness must be shared if we are to keep it.

PRAYER

by St. Catherine of Siena

Merciful Lord,
it does not surprise me that you forget completely the sins of those who repent.
I am not surprised that you remain faithful to those who hate and revile you.

The mercy which pours forth from you fills the whole world. It was by your mercy that we were created, and by your mercy that you redeemed us by sending your Son.

Your mercy is the light in which sinners find you and good people come back to you.
Your mercy is everywhere...
Your justice is constantly tempered with mercy, so you refuse to punish us as we deserve.

O mad Lover!
It was not enough for you to take on our humanity; you had to die for us as well.