

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Recently I heard this great story about an umpire in a softball league in our area. One day, during the off season, this unfortunate umpire got stopped by a police officer for speeding. The poor guy asked the officer to give him a break, explaining why he was in such a hurry. The cop didn't buy it. He said, "Tell it to the judge!"

When softball season rolled around, the umpire was at the plate. Guess who the first batter was? Yup, it was the policeman who had ticketed the umpire. They immediately recognized each other. The cop awkwardly asked, "So, how did the thing with the ticket go?" With a menacing look, the umpire replied, "You better swing at everything!" The umpire was going to get his revenge. Every pitch was going to be a strike.

Revenge! Sometimes it seems it can be deliciously sweet. More often than not it leaves a bitter, empty taste in the mouth.

Forgiveness is what the Lord calls us to—not just once or twice or seven times, but seventy-seven times—which in Scriptural parlance stands for infinity.

Unfortunately, many of us find it difficult to forgive. Others hold on to grudges for a lifetime. Why is that? Obviously, one answer is that the pain is simply too deep or too raw to overcome.

What's important here is to realize that in forgiving another the benefit to the one forgiving is far greater than it is to the one who is forgiven. Remember the grace of our Amish neighbors after their children were killed in the school at Nickel Mines. How they said they had to forgive for their own sake.

Forgiveness is a redemptive act that is essential to our mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being. To hold on to anger or resentment or hurt feelings is to allow an open wound in our psyche to fester and become so infected that we become bitter, angry, or resentful people.

In his teaching today, Jesus gives us this beautiful parable of a king who was owed an enormous debt by a man who had no way to pay. The king decided to sell the man, his wife, and his children into slavery, and seize all his property in payment of the debt. The man begs for more time. The king, moved by compassion, instead forgives him the entire debt.

Then, the debtor, the one who was forgiven, goes off and encounters a man who owes him just a little bit of money. He chokes him, beats him, and has him thrown into prison, even as the man begs for mercy. Others see this and in disgust report it to the king. The king has the man brought to him and says, "You wicked servant! I forgave you your entire debt because you begged me to. Should you not have had pity on your fellow servant, as I had

pity on you?” Angry, the king hands him over to the torturers until he should pay back the whole debt.

Then, Jesus says, “So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives your brother from your heart.”

What can be plainer than that! If we expect God to forgive us our sins, we have to be a forgiving people. Isn’t that what Jesus tells us even when he teaches us to pray: “Forgive us our trespasses, AS we forgive those who have trespassed against us”?

Probably everyone in this room has someone you need to forgive. An unfaithful spouse; an overbearing parent; an unruly child; a friend who has stabbed you in the back; a confidant who has broken your trust; an employer who has taken advantage of you; a teacher who plays favorites; a hard-headed student who refuses to cooperate; or, maybe, even a pastor who has disappointed you.

As I already suggested, the pain may be so deep or so raw, you can’t bring yourself to forgive. Then, recognize that forgiveness is a grace from God. Pray for the gift of forgiveness.

Sometimes we refuse to forgive because we’re too darned proud. “I won’t forgive until he says he’s sorry”. That, my dear Friends, is the pride of one who sees himself or herself as a victim. Forgiveness is a positive, joyful activity in which we change from seeing ourselves as victims to seeing ourselves as victors. Forgiveness allows us to experience within our own lives the power and the presence of the indwelling Spirit of Christ.

Then, there are those situations where we refuse to forgive because others encourage us not to. This often happens in families where grudges are carried from one generation to the next.

It happened in my own family. As I was preparing the guest list for those I would be inviting to my First Mass as I was preparing for my Ordination, my Father said, “Don’t invite that Don Murtha”. I asked, “Why not?” Dad replied, “Because he didn’t come to your Mother’s funeral”. I said, “Dad, I’m inviting all of my cousins. I can’t exclude him and his wife.” Dad said, “Well, I don’t want him there. He disrespected our Family. He disrespected your Mother.” I said, “Sorry, Dad, I’m inviting him anyway.” And so I did and Don and Joan joined in the celebration of my First Mass.

My Dad died shortly after that and Joan called to say that she and Don wouldn’t be at the funeral because they simply could not bear to go to funerals. They were too painful to them. I said that I understood and appreciated the call. But we stayed in touch.

Some years later, when I was a Pastor in North Philly, they invited me visit them at their home in Nottingham. They said they had a pool and horses to ride and if I wanted to bring

some kids out they were welcome. And so I did. I brought a car-load of Black kids from North Philly to Nottingham to enjoy a day in the country Summer after Summer for a number of years.

One year I got the bright idea to enact the Christmas pageant during the Midnight Mass, but I needed a donkey for Mary to ride in on. I thought of Don. He didn't have a donkey, but he had a pony. I called him; told him what I had in mind; and he said he would come with his pony. He built a pen on his pick-up truck and he and Joan hauled that pony from Nottingham to 28th and Diamond Sts. in North Philadelphia on a cold, snowy Christmas Eve. and paraded Mary astride a pony around the aisles in Most Precious Blood Church to the delight of the entire congregation.

Many years later it was my honor to preside first at Don's funeral and then, years later, at Joan's, down the street at Sacred Heart Church in Oxford. And today, and just about every Sunday, their Grandson, Pat Lauletta is right here in our music ministry, leading us in worship.

I don't think any of this would have happened if I had allowed myself to hold on to Dad's grudge, born of misunderstanding their pain for disrespect.

Allow me to end, recalling the words of the Prophet, Sirach:

Wrath and hanger are hateful things, yet the sinner hugs them tight. The vengeful will suffer the Lord's vengeance, for he remembers their sins in detail.

Forgive your neighbor's injustice; then when you pray, your own sins will be forgiven.

Could anyone nourish anger against another and expect healing from the Lord?

Could anyone refuse mercy to another like himself, can he seek pardon for his own sins?

If one who is but flesh cherishes wrath, who will forgive his sins?

Remember your last days, set enmity aside; remember death and decay, and cease from sin!

Think of the commandments, hate not your neighbor; remember the Most High's covenant, and overlook faults.

THIS is the Word of the Lord.