



**His Excellency,
The Most Reverend Edward K. Braxton, Ph.D., S.T.D.
Diocese of Belleville
Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time
5 PM Mass, September 16, 2023
St. Teresa Parish, Belleville
Sermon
“Forgive From Your Hearts”**

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

Some time ago I did something which I believe truly hurt someone whom I cared for deeply. When I realized the pain I had caused, I set out to make amends. I called the person repeatedly, left voicemail messages, sent texts, emails, and handwritten letters apologizing with all sincerity, yet the person never responded.

Now, more than a year has passed and still I have not succeeded in bringing about reconciliation, or forgiveness. I have prayed about this situation often, discussed it with my spiritual director, and acknowledged my fault in the matter in Confession. I truly want and need this person to forgive me. I simply do not know what else to do. Will God forgive someone unwilling to forgive me or you?

Forgiveness can be difficult in any human relationship: husbands and wives; sisters and brothers, friends, neighbors, coworkers, and, yes, members of a parish like St. Teresa or St. Luke. While parishioners, as members of Christian communities, usually make a special effort to get along with one another, we all know that there are conflicts and disagreements in every parish. In all of these relationships, Christians strive to work in harmony. And most of the time, we succeed. But since we are flawed human beings and redeemed sinners, there are times when differences lead to conflicts, when conflicts lead to anger, when anger boils over to open hostility and the bonds of Christian fellowship are strained almost to the breaking point.

We hurt each other, and there is a need to be forgiven, and a need to forgive. But this is not always easy. The person who hurts us may not seek forgiveness. If forgiveness is sought, we may not feel ready to forgive.

In Matthew 18, 16-25, Peter asks Jesus how many times he should forgive someone who hurts him. Seven times? Peter thinks he is being generous, since local rabbis taught that a good Jewish person must forgive an offender three times. So, Peter is surely shocked when Jesus replies not seven times but seventy-seven times, meaning His followers must forgive each other from their hearts, as many times as forgiveness is sought. Knowing that Peter and the disciples might think that His answer was unreasonable, Jesus tells one of His famous, “The Kingdom of Heaven is like,” stories in which the king represents God or Jesus Himself.

Jesus says: The Kingdom of Heaven is like a king who decides to settle accounts with his servants. A man owes the king a huge amount of money. The king orders him, his family, and land to be sold to pay the debt, since the servant did not have the money to pay it. The servant kneels before the king and begs for mercy. The king is moved with compassion and forgives the debt and lets his servant go free. Later, that servant meets a fellow servant who owed him only a few dollars. But instead of forgiving his friend the way the king forgave him, he chokes the man demanding, “Pay back what you owe.” The fellow servant pleads with his coworker to give him a little time. But he refuses and puts the fellow servant in prison until he can pay his debt.

When the king heard this, he sent for his servant saying, “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?” Then, in anger, the king handed him over to the torturers until he should pay back the whole debt, which he could never do from prison.

This story must have puzzled Peter who asked Jesus the question to find out how quickly he can stop forgiving those who hurt him. Jesus answers with a story that says His followers may never stop forgiving their sisters and brothers. We can never say, “That’s it. I’ve had enough. I am not going to forgive you anymore.” Peter may have thought this was unreasonable, and we

may feel the same way. Must we keep forgiving someone who hurts us over and over again? This does not seem fair.

How can one person be forgiven for a serious offense and then close his heart to another person seeking forgiveness for a minor offense? How can we receive compassion from God, from Christ, and not show compassion to others? The story makes us uncomfortable when it implies that if we refuse to forgive others, then God will refuse to forgive us. "So will my Father do to you, unless you forgive each other from your hearts."

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ:

If God were an elderly man above the clouds watching over us, we could imagine God being angry, like the king in the story, and not forgiving us when we do not forgive each other. But that God does not exist!

The God who is God is not God the way we would be God, if we were God. The God who is dwells in unapproachable light. Absolute truth, goodness, and beauty. The eternal, all powerful, all knowing, all just God who sustains the vast, ever-expanding universe. If you have seen the awesome photographs that NASA recently published from the new James Webb Space Telescope, you know these magnificent images peer back at the moment when the first stars cleared away limitless clouds of primordial gas, seen as light that has been traveling towards earth for 13.6 billion years.

The first stars began to burn as unfathomable vessels of brightness that would create the carbon, the nitrogen and the oxygen that make up 86.9% of our human bodies. By some alchemy of thermodynamics, by some act of primordial grace, we human beings are mostly composed of starlight, our mass coming from some mysterious vibration of immortal and timeless energy, echoing through the universe from the beginning of time. The Webb telescope has made us almost like the eyes of God peering out into the endless darkness and light of creation.

Does this great God of the universe really care about the actions of tiny human beings on a speck of dust we call Earth floating amid the flaming stars of heaven in our very small Milky Way galaxy and in our even tinier solar system? Does the great God who keeps the universe in existence love you and me enough to forgive us over and over when we sin and then withhold forgiveness when we do not forgive each other?

This is what Jesus is telling Peter in His story about the king and his unforgiving servant. It is overwhelming to think about the great God of the universe creating, loving, and forgiving you and I, and all people everywhere. But the next time you are tempted to refuse to forgive someone who has hurt you deeply, think about you must!

Why not discuss all of this with Jesus Christ after you receive His Body and Blood in the Eucharist in a few moments. Do not be surprised if He reminds you of the Sacrament of Reconciliation and instructs you to go to Confession, no matter how long it has been since your last Confession. Ponder His words, "So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives your sisters and brothers from your heart."

Praise be Jesus Christ. Both now and forever. AMEN!