

24th Sunday 2017

I have 4 brothers. Two are older and two are younger. My eldest brother was not as close in age as the 4 of us who were. It just so happens that my older brother, Bill is here today at this Mass with his wife Sue. They are here from Atlanta visiting their twin sons. Since we were 4 boys and close in age from time to time we would not get along and start fighting, arguing about something or other. My mother would hear us, come into the living room and then... (pretend to faint). Yes she would “feint” a faint. Of course we would all panic and ask her if she was ok. Needless to say she caught our attention. Our worry for her stopped our petty fighting and arguing. BTW she was so good at feinting fainting that she would do this whenever we were fighting. I think we caught on but liked to see her go into the dramatic faint. Not if our father was home...

As I think of it now, our mother not only got our attention but she also taught us that our fighting not only affected the four of us but hurt her as well. We were so caught up in our petty arguments, we never thought about how she would be hurt and offended by our actions.

Today’s scriptures are meant to “get our attention”. The Old Testament reading is pretty clear that we can not expect forgiveness for ourselves if we are unwilling to forgive the other person. Jesus is pretty clear as well about the unequivocal demand that we forgive a brother or sister “seventy times seven times” which essentially means infinitely. As God’s love is infinite, as God’s mercy is infinite, we too are mandated to forgive over and over again. Seriously? We are supposed to forgive those who have offended us by their words and deeds. We are supposed to forgive those who perpetrate and advocate violence against innocent people? We are supposed to forgive others who use cruel and demeaning “tweets” against others who are trying to have civil discourse?

Well, yes. If the other ‘asks” for forgiveness. If the other honestly recognizes the harm they have done to a “brother or sister”, than yes. We are called to forgive and we have no right

to “hold on to the hurt”. Like the servant in the Gospel parable, we can not expect forgiveness for ourselves if we fail to forgive the debt.

Let’s go back for a moment to the lesson my mother taught us. Our conflicts, arguments, offended her, hurt her as much as we were hurting our relationships with our brothers. Our sinful actions have implications for others. Do you remember this?

O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended thee. And I detest all my sins because I dread the loss of heaven and the pains of hell. But most of all because they offend thee my God who art all good and deserving of all my love. I firmly resolve with the help of thy grace to confess my sins, do penance and amend my life.

Yes, that’s the act of contrition. But as I’ve gotten older, I’ve had problems saying it. It’s the idea of “offending” God. Do I really believe that God takes “offense” at my sinfulness? Does the eternal God dwelling in glory and majesty really care about your or my “pettiness”, Is God really “offended” in the same way that we human beings “offend” each other with our words and deeds? Yes, it’s beginning to make sense. We offend God when we sin because the harm we do to another is “felt” by God. Kind of like my mother “fainting”. Our conflicts, our quarrels, our inability to get along and ask for forgiveness was “felt” by her, by someone we loved. God is offended by our cruelty to each other because we are all created by God, loved by God and hopefully forgiven by God.

And it’s not just our sinful actions against other human beings the demands forgiveness and contrition. Don’t we need to ask for forgiveness for the damage we have done to our world, to the environment. Our human selfishness has blinded us to the harm that we have done to this earth.

If you want, I’ll faint again to get your attention. Or maybe I can just quote Saint Paul. None of us lives for oneself. We are all connected. We are all God’s children. Can we look into our hearts and have the courage to ask for forgiveness of those we

have offended and forgive those who have asked us to forgive them?

A good friend of mine, a Jesuit priest from Kingston Jamaica tells this story. His father was murdered when he was a young boy. His family lived in a part of Kingston where there was much violence. Years later, after he was ordained a priest, he went to the prison where his father's murderer was incarcerated. The man who killed his father asked him to forgive him. What do you think he did? What would you do? What would Jesus ask you to do?