24th Sunday of Ordinary Time – Cycle A

Sirach 27: 30–28: 7; Rom 14: 7-9; Matthew 18: 21-35

September 11, 2011

Today is the 10th anniversary of 9-11, that day when the Twin Towers went down and Flight 93 crashed in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, and the Pentagon was attacked.

I cannot capture the entire spectrum of emotions and experiences that each of you may have had then on that day, or have now. I know there are some here who have served in the Armed Forces and have seen battle in Iraq or Afghanistan. Perhaps others knew someone who was killed that day in the Twin Towers, or at the Pentagon, or on Flight 93. Perhaps there is someone who was at Ground Zero that day – we all were there I guess one way or another with all the media coverage.

I cannot expect myself, or I hope would you expect of me in this short homily to be able to give voice to what that day has meant to each of you. I in no way wish to be critical of anyone. I honor the service many of you have rendered in the Armed Forces and the other ways as civilians we have responded to the needs of each other and our country since 9-11. We still mourn the loss of life that day, and of course, we must never forget them. We must have due diligence in protecting our families and our country from further harm.

But deacons, priests and bishops who preach today are face with this challenge:

1. How to break open the Scripture readings for today, and apply them to the reality of what this anniversary may mean to their parishioners.
2. How to break open your hearts to hear and accept what God is saying to us especially in the Gospel and first reading today.

I hope we all are up to the task of the day. I ask you to open your hearts to God’s word. What I say, I say because God’s Word demands it and it is his voice that we must hear, not our own.

There is a saying, ***“There go I, but by the grace of God!”*** This is an expression that reminds us of the need for patience, tolerance and understanding of others. It reminds us to be slow to judge, for in the end none of us can boast before the Lord. It reminds us that all of us are capable of great things with God’s help, and all of us are capable of horrible things, and it God’s grace and his love and our cooperation with that grace and love that save us – not our solitary efforts nor the wars we wage.

If we forget this, it would be easy for us to be appalled by the servant in today’s Gospel for he experienced complete forgiveness only to go out and be completely unforgiving to his neighbor. Yes, it would be easy to condemn the ungrateful servant unless we remember that, “There go I, but for the grace of God” for ***sin is the dark inheritance of every human being***. We call it “original sin,” and its effects are felt by all of us. This servant, I would suspect, probably was trying to do the best he could in life. He no doubt had run into difficult times financially. The Gospel tells us that he had a wife, children and property so he was no criminal or misfit. He was probably like you and me, and he was probably hurt and angry over some injustice rendered to him. He probably wasn’t a “bad man.” He was like us in those ways. But he couldn’t forgive.

God is telling us if we expect forgiveness, ***we must forgive*** and the first step in forgiveness is patience with others which opens our hearts to the possibility of understanding them and showing them mercy.

“***Be patient with me, and I will pay you back in full.”***

We put our own forgiveness at risk by refusing to forgive and by resenting those who harm us. God cannot be at home in a heart that does not forgive, for such a heart ends up seeking revenge and revenge is the sister to hatred and hatred is the opposite of love, and God is Love.

The inability to forgive is perhaps one of the greatest obstacles to holiness for it ***robs us of our lives. It is spiritual suicide.***

If we refuse to forgive, then the sins of others will fall on our shoulders, and we will be surrounded by darkness, and we will be at war – war with ourselves, war with our neighbors, and war with God. ***That is a war we cannot win.*** We cannot fight God and win.

Evil is defeated by forgiveness and mercy. Evil triumphs when we judge and resent, when we seek revenge and wage war.

Let us not judge each other in regard to this. We all fall short of the obligation to forgive. We all can identify, if we are really honest, with the ungrateful servant in today’s Gospel. I know my thoughts and my heart had more than enough anger and resentment ten years ago today – the desire to fight back, to seek out and to destroy and to seek revenge. I have not gotten past that really, even today.

I once knew a man, whom I will call Andrew. He came from the direst of situations in life. Physical, emotional, sexual abuse as a child, discrimination in the deep south back before the civil rights movement in the 60s. He continued to be the victim of abuse into his adulthood. Later in life you might say “he found God” for all he could do when I knew him was talk about Jesus and the Bible. He wasn’t from our Catholic faith…. He belonged to one of the evangelical congregations. He learned the hard way to keep away from some of those who wanted to continue to abuse and misuse him, how to protect himself. One day he told me that he had gone to some of those who continued to want to hurt him and he told them, “I forgive you and I love you, and there is nothing you can do about that.”

***I forgive you, and I love you and there is nothing that you can do about that.***

Yes, when you forgive someone there is nothing they can do about it. They cannot stop you from forgiving them.

Forgiveness is a powerful, devastating blow to evil.

Forgiveness keeps us free.

Sin is powerless over it.

Evil is completely defeated by mercy.

To bring good out of evil is God’s work, and that is where we come it for when we forgive, we bring an end to the cycle of violence and revenge.

What greater proof do we have than the crucifix?