

FORGIVE FROM THE Heart

TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

CYCLE A

Sirach 27:30–28:7

Romans 14:7–9

Matthew 18:21–35

GATHERING

(A candle, a bible open to one of the scriptures for this week's session, and perhaps some flowers from the garden of one of the community members, are arranged in the gathering space. Some small pieces of paper, one for each member, and just big enough for three or four words, are placed near the candle.)

We are a church of sinners. Forgiveness is what we all need and what Jesus' life, death and resurrection are all about. Yet the giving and receiving of forgiveness can be one of the hardest things to do. This week's liturgy acknowledges that difficulty and invites us to confront God's call to love.

(The session begins with some sharing of events in the lives of the members since the community last gathered. This is particularly important if a new member is a part of the group.)

OPENING PRAYER

Leader: Hurt and anger are part of all our lives. There are probably some unresolved wounds within us or some alienating

events for which we ourselves bear some responsibility that still seek our attention. In silence let some such area of your life surface. Acknowledge it and consider it for a few moments. (*Extended pause.*)

Leader: Lord, we acknowledge the wounds of our lives, our own and those we have inflicted. Heal us Lord. Help us to accept forgiveness with grace. Help us to offer forgiveness from the heart. (*Pause.*) In Jesus' name, we pray.

All: Amen.

Focus Question

What happens to you when you are hurt or angry?

SCRIPTURE SHARING AND REFLECTION

Sirach 27:30–28:7

Matthew 18:21–35

COMMENTARY

Anger, wrath, vengeance, enmity, hate--these are ugly things, but the human heart knows them well. And the author of Sirach knows the human heart well when he tells us that "the sinner hugs them tight".

Bosnia and Northern Ireland are but two witnesses to how deep and long-lasting, how seemingly intransigent hurt can be. The longer it is held on to, the harder it is to let it go. Investment breeds investment and hate is passed from generation to generation.

In our individual lives, the slights and wounds of years gone by can live on as fresh as if the knife just drew blood. And the one at whose feet the blame is laid may not only not acknowledge it, but may have long since forgotten the offense.

Forgiving someone who asks forgiveness, that is one thing; even that can be a struggle at times. But how do we forgive someone who does not ask

for forgiveness, or who does not want it?

Letting go of anger does not mean repressing it. It is important to acknowledge it to ourselves and to give honest and appropriate expression to it. The master in the parable grew angry at the behavior of his unforgiving servant. Jesus himself is seen to grow angry at times.

Human stinginess, however, is confronted in this gospel by the immensity of God's forgiveness. The Lord calls us to cultivate a disposition modeled on the heart of God. God's priority is on forgiveness.

Thank God: *The Lord is kind and merciful.*

FAITH SHARING AND INTEGRATION

(The community pauses in silence for several minutes to ponder the scriptures and the questions which follow.)

1. Recall a time when forgiving someone (in your family, at work, in the parish) or being forgiven made all the difference in the world.
2. How easy or hard is it for you to forgive? How easy or hard is it for you to ask for forgiveness?
3. How has this community helped you to be a forgiving person?
4. Where do you find stinginess in your heart?
5. How have you accepted someone with whom you have experienced a difference?

RESPONSE IN ACTION

Leader: In the light of our sharing of life and faith over the scripture for this week's liturgy, what does God ask of you, personally; what does God ask of us as a community?
(After an extended pause, the leader invites responses from the community.)

Suggestions:

1. Pray for someone from whom you may be alienated.
2. Put your capacity for anger at the service of those who cry out for justice, but whose voice may not be heard. Act in support of a low-income housing project.
3. Consider someone in your life who may feel offended by something you have done or failed to do. Take stock. If it is called for, approach that person and seek reconciliation.

SENDING FORTH AND CLOSING PRAYER

(The leader introduces the prayer by first inviting the members of the community to take one of the small pieces of paper near the candle. Members are asked to jot down just a few words which take note of some unresolved offense they have suffered. It should be made clear that they will not be asked to share this situation with the group, but only with God. A short pause allows time for people to write.)

Leader: We are a wounded people, a hurting Church, a broken world. Let us pray for healing, for the needs of the world and the church, and for our families and ourselves. Please respond to the petitions: ***Lord, heal us. Lord make us whole.***

(When the petitions have run their course, the leader invites the members, one at a time, either to ignite their paper from the candle and place it on an appropriate plate while it is consumed, or if burning is impractical, to tear the paper in pieces and lay them on the table.

*As the paper is either ignited or torn, the individual prays aloud, **The Lord is kind and merciful.** The community in turn replies: **The Lord is kind and merciful.***

The session concludes with the exchange of a sign of peace.)