

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity
September 17, 2017

+

Saint Peter was a lucky man. He could ask Almighty God a question man to man. You and I might be tempted to ask which horses will win the Daily Double at Suffolk Downs! But Peter's question was about **forgiveness**. Notice all three lessons at Mass today are about **forgiveness**. **Sin** and **forgiveness** and **mercy** are words mentioned frequently in every celebration of Mass. Other words, like **sorrow**, **guilt**, and **reconciliation**, you hear more often on television talk shows and soap operas. Have you noticed the latest buzz phrase is "**reaching out**?" Yet as today's Gospel makes clear, despite our familiarity with these words we really do not know much about their depth of meaning. We talk about **sorrow**, **guilt**, and **reconciliation** all the time and maybe that is a way to avoid thinking too deeply about them.

So we can credit St Peter with asking the Right Man the right question. "Just how many times must I forgive?" Peter then betrayed his misunderstanding of the meaning of the word **forgiveness**. That is when he added "as many as seven times?" You remember the old line, "If you have to ask the price you can't afford it" But St Peter is not in a real estate office or car dealership. He is with the Lord Jesus. If you put forgiveness into the realm of a numbers game, it isn't forgiveness!

So when the Lord replied, "Seventy times seven" He wasn't telling Peter to do the math and then stop forgiving once he reached that number! Christ was reminding us of something we tend to forget. Terms like **mercy** and **forgiveness** are borrowed from our own human experience and applied to God's dealings with us. But we can only do that by *analogy*, not by the plain sense of our own experience. At the bottom line there is simply no comparison between *our* mercy and forgiveness and that of Almighty God. "My ways are not your ways saith the Lord."

"Seventy times seven" means our forgiveness must become so much a part of our inner spiritual condition that it no longer involves a conscious effort. That is how God forgives. He is not conscious of having the virtue of forgiving. He is a forgiving God. That is Who He is. And The Lord Jesus sets His goal for us on that level.

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity
September 17, 2017

+

There is a funny story told about after-dinner conversation over drinks in the Oxford College where C.S. Lewis and his colleagues taught. And the question was put: “What does God know?” And after much discussion, and consulting of old dust-covered books, one learned professor made the final pronouncement on the question. “God doesn’t know anything!” Which of course caused quite a bit of mirth and gaiety! You and I may or may not be in a position to know. But Almighty God is the source of knowledge.

How far from this are we? Our Lord tells a story. It shows a servant pleading for forgiveness from his master and then not extending forgiveness to his own servant. And in both Old Testament society and today this is the way things work. The man is getting what he can for himself from his superior and taking what he can for himself from his inferior. In secular culture this isn’t even considered immoral. It’s called “business as usual.” But Almighty God did not join us “in the flesh” to condone business as usual.

In the parable Jesus told, the master did not end up punishing the unforgiving servant for being unmerciful. What the master did do was move the relationship back to the “business as usual” condition of debt and punishment. The servant had been offered forgiveness. But forgiveness had not graced him. He had not moved into the forgiveness channel where mercy flows. He was stuck in the old legal business of playing games with his master and his servant. Is that what we want? So it actually was an act of kindness to restore the old relationship. “Business as usual” was what the servant understood. For his own good this man was handed over to the tormentors.

The gospel standard remains as high as our Lord set it. At the very heart of Jesus’ favorite prayer is revealed this intimate relationship between overlooking offences in others and having our offences overlooked. In giving us this prayer we call the “Our Father” Our Blessed Lord was inviting you and me to imitate the generosity with which Almighty God Himself forgives.