Forgiving, Forgetting and Insincerity

One of the key features of the Gospel is forgiveness. The part of the world in which Jesus exercised His public ministry had what could at best be called “limited forgiveness.” Saint Peter demonstrates that phenomenon when asking about how many times we can forgive. A careful reading of parts of the Old Testament and elements of the Quran make it clear that indignation, wrath, and punishment are elements imbedded in the culture. One of the reasons that the Gospel of Jesus Christ was so unsettling to many was because it was so radically different from a daily life where the lack of forgiveness and having a desire for vengeance were common place.

One could argue that the world in which we find ourselves today is becoming increasingly obvious that if we simply look at the distribution of the World Religions around the globe that Christians are increasingly less prominent, but the critical point is the Beatitudes, in particular, and the Gospel which includes grace, are not necessarily central in the lives of those who call themselves Christians. Sadly, by institutionalizing the dynamic words of radical forgiveness given to us by Jesus, we Sacramental Christians can relegate forgiveness to a few minutes at Mass or a little time “in the box.” Non-Sacramental Christians may hand us a tract or convince us of our sin, but there is more, isn’t there? If Jesus died on the Cross for our sins, do we, who represent Him, have an obligation to be more like Him?

All too often we may well encounter someone who asked us to forgive them, which is a good thing, but should we forget? Perhaps there are two possible types of “forgetting.” One type of forgetting is for one to act as if the offence never happened, and that the forgiveness element is operative. The other type is that the forgiveness element is operative, but the act is not mentioned nor is it forgotten, lest we or they once again fall into the same trap. If a behavior, even if unintentionally, has hurt or offended the other, the offender must never forget, even when forgiven, that amendment of life requires a change in behavior. That is, if we are dealing with an individual who is easily hurt and offended, if we have caused them pain, we must remember the level of their sensitivity. Likewise, if we are easily hurt and offended, then we must never forget that not everyone responds the same way I do. Part of the cultural dilemma today is that we assume that everyone thinks and feels the way I do. Forgetting how sensitive another person is and forgetting how sensitive I may be very often involves the need to offer and receive forgiveness. But let us never forget what caused the offence.

So, take a few moments and think about the many times you have been forgiven. Never forget that you have been forgiven and never forget how precious it is to be forgiven. Now think about the number of times you have forgiven another. Never forget how healing your words of forgiveness may have been. There is simply no way to undo some sins committed in life. There is, however, opportunity given by God to look carefully at Jesus to see how he forgave, even to the extent of explaining the ignorance of those who offended Him ultimately, “Father forgive them for they know not what they do.” “Lord, remember me when you come into Your Kingdom,” the penitent thief stated. Jesus remembered Him by offering him hope, and Jesus’ words may well have been the last words the thief heard. Can you name someone whom you need to forgive? Can you name someone whom you hope will someday forgive you? Do not simply sacramentalize it or rationalize it — confess it. And while even after forgiveness there is memory, imagine what it would be like if there could only be memory without forgiveness. Real forgiveness often involves paying the price of looking someone in the eye.

Years ago, I was able to help a woman work through the pain and suffering she had endured as a child, to the extent that she had hated her mother intensely and now knew that she needed to “let go” of her bitterness. Her unforgiving spirit spilled over into her relationships with others, and the very things she hated in her mother, she began to see in herself. Finally, she was ready to forgive, but her mother had died. I remember driving the woman to the cemetery where her mother’s earthly remains had been interred, and there she tearfully proclaimed her forgiveness of her mother and asked God to forgive her for the hardness of her own heart. Let’s not wait that long. Even if the words are difficult, a prayer card is not difficult to mail. **Forgive…but don’t forget to change.**