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Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Sirach 27:30-28:7

Psalms 103

Romans 14:7-9

Matthew 18:21-35

Sometimes it's hard to figure out if the Lectionary addresses us as philosophy class students or as kindergarteners. Our reading from Sirach offers a little philosophy mixed with psychology, all under the heading of wisdom. The thrust of the entire reading is summarized in our first line: "Wrath and anger are hateful things, yet the sinner hugs them tight."

We might wish that Mark Twain or C.S. Lewis had given us a short story illustrating that theme, as both of them had a delightful ability to portray some people's foolish tendency to maintain their own misery while thinking they were exhibiting moral superiority.

One of our sisters explained Sirach's truth by commenting that some people go through life pressing their bruises. Such folks are loathe to let an injury heal or go away; they seem to find comfort or moral security in the status of being the injured party.

Today's Gospel takes up the theme of what to do with anger or injury. With Peter as the one who starts the discussion, we seem to leave the college classroom and go to recess time at a grade school. We can picture Peter looking around at the other disciples and raising an eyebrow as he asks Jesus, "How often do I have to forgive such as these?" With princely magnanimity, he proposes going to extremes. His question and semi-offer, "Seven times?", is really a way of asking, "Should I forgive lots more often than seems to be reasonable?"

Jesus responds with what could be made into a rhythmic playground chant: "Not just seven/but 77/over and again/forever and ever/Amen!"

To help the group get the message, Jesus weaves them a tale about a great con artist who amassed a debt so big that the language didn't have real numbers to describe it. In those days, it would have taken an army of 100,000 with each soldier carrying a 100-pound pack of silver to pay off that guy's debt. Putting on an Oscar-worthy sad face, the debtor begged for a little time to get it together, and the master let him off the hook knowing that repayment was ridiculously improbable.

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Then, that wicked charlatan, who should have been throwing a block party to celebrate his redemption, instead threw one of his poor companions in jail for a debt that, while miniscule in comparison to the first, was way more than the poor guy could come up with. Of course, nobody cried when they heard that the once-forgiven, never-forgiving debtor ended up getting just what he had given the other.

The story Jesus told in response to Peter's question ultimately raised a much deeper question. Peter wanted to know how much he had to put up with in the community. The parable of the unforgiving debtor asks what kind of world disciples want to create.

Sirach told his readers that remembering that we are all going to die can shed important light on the choices we make today. In his novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the Nobel Prize-winning author Gabriel García Márquez told the story of Amaranta, a woman whose name seemed to be an indecisive combination of the words *amor* and *amarga*, love and bitterness. Amaranta had received a vision in which she learned that she was to weave her own shroud, and when she had finished, she would die. She did her work faithfully, sometimes weaving, sometimes tearing it apart, consistently reworking it until the day it was done, and she was ready to die.



(Mark Bartholomew)

Her artisan task was symbolic of the undertaking of every human life. We each weave our own stories, mending, tearing, making mistakes and introducing new textures and themes; undoing and reworking until the task comes to completion.

As individuals, the life we weave is in our hands. We cannot determine what will come our way, but we can decide how we will weave it into our story, how we will interpret it, whether we will let it engender love or bitterness. As communities, the world we pray for can only come about through the work of human hands that are open to receive the grace and work together to make a world worthy of the people of God.

Peter asked Jesus: "How often must I forgive?" Sirach asks us: "Could anyone refuse mercy to another like himself?" Jesus asks us what kind of world we wish to create.

In the long run, forgiving what others have done may be a small price to pay for the privilege of living in a world where the compassion of God appearsbut "77/over and again/now and forever/Amen!"

[Mary M. McGlone, a Sister of St. Joseph of Carondelet, is currently writing the history of the Sisters of St. Joseph in the U.S.]

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