

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time – 2020 A

39 years ago, the Pope was shot. Many will remember that day – May 13, 1981, the 64th anniversary of the first appearance of Mary at Fatima – when 23-year-old Mehmet Ali Agca wounded Pope John Paul II in St. Peter’s Square. It was just six weeks after Ronald Reagan had been shot in Washington; ***and then, as now, people wondered what the world was coming to.*** Many also remember the iconic *Time* magazine cover photo of John Paul and Agca meeting 2 ½ years later, just after Christmas, when the Pope visited his would-be assassin in Rebibbia Prison in Rome ... ***and forgave him.***

Was it just a photo op? Was it done out of a sense of duty as such a remarkably public Christian figure, so that the Pope really had no choice but to make this gesture? Was it life-changing for Agca, who reportedly converted to Christian faith and many years later brought roses to John Paul’s tomb, or were those actions just more threads in a web of intrigue? While some would argue for these and other possibilities, I believe Saint John Paul II took this Gospel to heart ... as he must have done so many times in his life under both Nazi and Communist regimes ... and truly forgave the man who had tried to kill him. He did so for Agca, to give him hope; and for the world, to teach the power of forgiveness; but I also wonder if perhaps he did it partly for his own soul, to be able to live in freedom and bring closure to this chapter of history. ***For indeed, forgiveness cannot erase the past, but it does create a new future.***

“Not seven times, but 77 times. Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. The measure you measure with will be measured back to you. So will my heavenly Father do to you, UNLESS each of you forgives your brother from your heart.” All of these words of Jesus, and many more, clearly reveal that ***forgiveness is an essential element of the Kingdom of God.*** And lest it all seem just an impossible ideal, words that ask the impossible, Jesus Himself prays for those who crucify Him: ***“Father, forgive them; they know not what they do.”*** If we wish to be forgiven – and we are all debtors in the eyes of God – then we must forgive. There is no subtle or hidden here ... it is as clear as can be.

Forgiveness can be a struggle. Sometimes, the hurt is too deep, too fresh, and saying “I forgive” just is not yet true. When Jesus told Peter, “Not seven times,” *I wonder if Peter felt a moment of relief*; but then came that “77 times.” 77 implies a lot of pardoning. But more than a number, I think Jesus means in part just this journey to forgive ... we may need to resolve to pardon another over and over again, to strive to forgive from the heart 9 times, 32 times, 61 times ... and by the time we get to 77, we are ready to let go. As I said last week recounting Immaculee’s story of forgiveness, we can confuse forgiving with condoning or approving the wrong, as though to forgive is to say that the hurt doesn’t matter, was not that big a deal ... even though it was. ***And forgiveness does not mean that those who do wrong need not be held accountable; and even if that does not happen in this life, we are assured in faith that there will be a resolution of all human suffering in a way we cannot fully understand on the last day.*** But here and now, Jesus urges us to forgive for the sake of OUR OWN spiritual and emotional health. When we forgive, we lay down that heavy load of resentment and anger, bitterness and brooding that can weigh heavily on our hearts and poison our joy. The other person may NEVER apologize; but ***that does not mean that we cannot forgive*** ... we do not need to wait for an apology to find our own peace. To forgive – wherever we are today along that path to 77 times – takes a decisive step towards being free to go on with our lives in a new way, and expresses our trust that God will make all things right in His own way and His own time.

Again today, we can ask: what weight can I hand to the Lord Who bore the weight of the Cross to bring mercy into the world? ***It is true that forgiveness cannot erase the past, but it does create a new future; and whatever number we are on towards 77, we can take another step into that future of mercy and freedom, today.***