

The Sacrifice of Forgiveness

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Hello everyone. I'm Johnnette Benkovic, back with you again as we continue to make our way through Advent. Well here we are, we're in the second week of Advent. Isn't it hard to imagine that we're already at this point in time? The last time that we were together, we were talking about the beautiful reality of this great gift of preparation that is ours during this Advent season, and we talked about the attitude of waiting, and the spirituality of waiting, and how it is that we wait with expectant hope, with faith, how it is that we wait with this patient, and how it is that we wait through the activity of the process that is unfolding within us.

We also talked about the way in which we should wait, what it is that we should do during that time of waiting, and we referenced our Blessed Lady, and the fact that she pondered all of these things in her heart as she waited. Waited with joy and expectant faith for the coming of the Christ child, waited through those 30 years of that hidden life in Nazareth with Him, and then waited through those 3 years of public ministry, knowing that ultimately His mission would be fulfilled. And we mentioned that this pondering of our Blessed Lady was not some kind of just, you know, daydream that was taking place within her imagination, but rather it was a time of prayerful meditation. Looking at the hand of God moving through the events of her life.

And so I encouraged you, as well myself, to make use of this beautiful season of Advent, to be one in which we fortify and strengthen our life of prayer. If you remember, I mentioned to you that this prayer is meant to mark every day of our lives obviously. But it is in prayer that we truly enter into the divine life, and the divine life enters into us. And it's there in prayer that we can experience this movement of grace that's already happening within us. That the promise that is given to us in this Advent season for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ has already been fulfilled, and we can look at how that's happening in that moment. But also to look forward to this new time, this new arrival of Christ, who desires to give us more gifts, more opportunity to enter into the divine life, more experience of grace flooding our souls and radiating out from us.

You know, we mentioned also that this time of Advent has a penitential character to it, and I shared with you that this has been with Advent from its very inception. It's not as strict as a penitential notion as we find certainly in the liturgical season of Lent, but nonetheless it is part of this season. And so we should be looking at ways in which we can enter into a type of sacrificial offering to the Lord. And when we think about the great reality of the day and time in which we live, and the way in which so many personal relationships are convoluted at this moment,

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it reminds us that perhaps the greatest sacrifice that we can make to God is through an act of humility of forgiveness. And this second week of Advent, I think, is a good time for us to begin to perhaps do an inventory, an inventory of those individual whom we need to forgive.

Now it's an interesting thing, because there's not a person in the world who has not experienced some kind of difficult moment through the actions of another against them. This is the human condition. We are all broken and fallen people. We have hurt others, and others have hurt us as well. And perhaps one of the greatest wounds of the heart is that wound of being betrayed by another, perhaps abandoned by another, perhaps rejected by another. Father Richard McAlear tells us that these 3 wounds of the heart are the common wounds to the heart that everyone has experienced. And there is a tendency when we have suffered through the hands of another to permit ourselves to fall into the idea that we are justified in our anger toward that individual.

But you know my dear friends, that attitude does not come from God. That attitude comes from the pit of hell. Because when we give way to an ongoing type of anger, it breathes noxious fruits in our souls. It breathes, if you will, the bitter fruit of resentment and bitterness, which ultimately lead to a hardness of heart. Extended perhaps in a brutal way towards the person that's injured us, but ultimately affecting all of our relationships, including our relationship with God. And the interesting thing about this is that this kind of ongoing fueling of the fire of anger within us is experienced in the very reality of our physicality. High blood pressure, gastrointestinal disorders, heart disease. All of these kinds of things are often the result of lack of forgiveness. Many autoimmune disorders, caused by lack of forgiveness, because there is a biochemical reaction to hostility of heart that, through the release of hormones in our brain, or the lack of release of hormones in our brain, causes our immune systems to break down. And I look at all of these autoimmune disorders that are out there today and it causes me to wonder if it isn't because we are resistant to forgiveness.

So as you, you know, think about this, and you're doing that little mental inventory that I asked you to do, ask yourself a deep question: Have you forgiven? Maybe you say no. Maybe you say "No, I haven't. I don't want to. I'm not going to." And maybe part of the reason for that is because you have a faulty notion of what forgiveness is. We live in a day and time that's relegated by emotion, and sometimes we think "Well, you know, I don't feel forgiveness, therefore I haven't forgiven." Or, you know, "Because of this pain and this injury to my heart, I cannot forgive. That emotion, that sense of forgiveness will never be mine towards this individual." But, you see, forgiveness is not an emotion. We don't feel forgiveness, or even feeling it in no way indicates that we have or have not forgiven. Forgiveness is truly a free will action. It's an action. We choose to forgive. It's a free will action prompted by grace that sets us free from the act that was perpetrated against us, and permits us to move freely once again.

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Lack of forgiveness, you see, binds us to the action that was committed against us. It holds us in place, you see. It holds us in place. And the only thing that can get us out of the place is forgiveness. And we begin to draw away from that which has caused us pain, and we begin to rise up in a brand new direction. It holds us in bondage. It's a free will action, and it comes through grace. And this is why Jesus tells us to pray for our persecutors. Do you remember that passage in Sacred Scripture? He says pray for our persecutors, because it's prayer that moves us and enables us to receive the grace that we need to make that free will action. And when we're praying, especially for those that have injured us, we are calling down abundant mercy from God, which fills our heart, and then can be extended to the other. It's a spiritual reality. It's a spiritual principle. And so the best way that we can enter into this free will action is by doing what Jesus says to do: Praying for our persecutor. Pray for that persecutor. And every time ill will in us rises up towards that individual, we pray yet again.

Now, this is a process, I want to tell you. Forgiveness is a process. And I mentioned earlier that sometimes we don't want to forgive. So we need to pray another way too. We need to pray for the desire to forgive. "Father God, I pray for the desire to forgive." And if you say "I can't even do that Johnnette. I cannot even pray for the desire to forgive," then we back it up a desire. "Father God, I pray for the desire to desire to forgive." And if that's still too close, we can't do that either, we back it up one more desire. "Father, I pray for the desire to desire to desire to forgive." And we back it up as many desires as we have to go until we're comfortable there, and we find a home there, and we find a place there, and we can begin to move forward from there. We find our starting point, and that's what it is. It's a start that can lead us forward in this process of forgiveness.

It's important for us to also know that forgiveness does not mean that everything is now okay. It doesn't. There are some situations, circumstances, and individuals that are toxic. Bad for us. Not good. And so, therefore, reconciliation may not be an option. Forgiveness does not mean that everything is now okay. It doesn't mean that in some way we are lessening the sin that was committed against us. It doesn't mean that either. And it doesn't mean that there shouldn't be retribution, if necessary, for the action that was committed against us. No. It doesn't mean that either. It simply means that we employ the grace God gives us to move forward in the action, so that we might be freed from the sin that was perpetrated against us, and move forward in Him, and receive the healing that we need.

It's a process as well, because the Holy Spirit is going to begin to reveal to us, as we prayerfully enter into this forwarding of the grace of mercy, the Holy Spirit is going to deal with us in that wounded area. And we might see, through that eternal gaze, that we have indeed been affected deeply, and that this deep affecting has truly caused us to build up defense mechanisms, to perhaps view the world through that wound, which surely is a distorted gaze. We might see that we have acted out of that wound, maybe some of the dysfunctions that we experience

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are a result of that. Maybe we find that we overreact to situations where the provocation does not require that kind of intense response. And maybe we see that it's all rooted into this particular action that we experienced. And so what does Father God ask us to do? He asks us to heed the words of His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. We pray for our persecutor there.

“Father God, I pray for this person who not only caused me this thrust of the wound of the heart, but also for the way in which that's affected my perception of the world and who I am in it. For the way in which it's affected the way in which I approach others. The way in which it's caused me, perhaps, to be rebellious in certain ways, or afraid of authority, or whatever the case may be. I desire to forgive this person for that too. I desire to desire to forgive that person too. I desire to desire to desire to forgive that person too.” You see, we move forward in the process of restoration and healing.

In Joel chapter 2, verse 25, we receive a beautiful, beautiful word from the Lord. The prophet tells us that God says He will restore what the locusts have eaten. This holy Advent season, God wants to work a process of restoration in you. And it requires your cooperation with grace, and that cooperation with grace is cooperation with the grace of forgiveness. Begin where you are, trust in the Lord, move forward. May His will be done in you. Until we are together again, I faithfully remain your sister in Christ.