

TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (YEAR A)

September 13, 2020

Sirach 27:30–28:7 • Romans 14:7–9 • Matthew 18:21–35

I.

You may remember that back in July,
I traveled to the Virginia-Kentucky border.

There, at Breaks Interstate Park,
I hiked the gorge that is called the Grand Canyon of the South.

The following day it was raining, so I couldn't go hiking.

In trying to find something to do on a rainy day,
I came across the Hatfield-McCoy driving tour in nearby Pikeville, KY.

So off I went.

I had heard the phrase “the Hatfields and McCoys,”
but I didn't know about the history of that infamous dispute.

And what a historic feud it was between those families...

The dispute took place over two generations in the Tug River Valley
that separates Kentucky and West Virginia,
and lasted from the mid-1800s to the early 1900s.

During that time, there were multiple killings, and also forbidden love,
between various members of the two families.

Mistrust, revenge, and loss were constants for both families over that time period.

As part of the driving tour, I visited multiple graves,
which provided a good reminder and a sober lesson:
death comes for all of us.

To quote the English poet John Donne (1572–1631),

“No man is an island,
Entire of itself. . . .
Each man’s death diminishes me,
For I am involved in mankind.
Therefore, send not to know
For whom the bell tolls,
It tolls for thee.”

In traversing those mountain roads while listening to the driving tour CD,
I reflected on the power of resentment,
of nursing a grudge instead of forgiving another person.

In the words of the First Reading,

“Wrath and anger are hateful things,
yet the sinner hugs them tight.”

II.

Today’s Gospel is about overcoming those “hateful things.”

It is the second teaching on reconciliation in the as many weeks.

Last Sunday’s reading was on confronting someone who’s done something wrong;
this Sunday’s reading is about healing that rift:

“Lord, if my brother sins against me,
how often must I forgive?
As many as seven times?’
Jesus answered, ‘I say to you, not seven times but seventy-seven times.’”

“Seventy-seven times” is a figurative expression that means infinitude;
there is no limit to forgiveness,
because this is how God forgives.

And that is the point of the parable that follows,
about the king and his servants:

If God has forgiven us, we are to forgive others.

The unwillingness to forgive another becomes a kind of prison;
it can block us from God,
whose nature is to forgive:

“In anger his master handed him over to the torturers
until he should pay back the whole debt.
So will my heavenly Father do to you,
unless each of you forgives your brother from your heart.”

It’s something that we may not have considered:
unwillingness to forgive another person can be a mortal sin,
meaning that it destroys our relationship with God and, if unrepented,
can lead us to hell.

And that would make sense,
because hell is defined as the absence of God,
whereas God’s nature—his presence—is to forgive.

Forgiveness is a process.

I think that, in a way, we often have to forgive the same fault “77 times,”
meaning again and again.

Often, we think we’ve forgiven someone,
but the wound hasn’t completely healed.

It’s as if a scab has formed, and then something comes into contact with it,
and then all of the pain comes rushing back.

It’s a reminder that forgiveness is a process that takes time—and effort.

I have a few thoughts for how we can go about forgiving others.

First, and most important, God not only commands us to forgive,
but he also gives us the power—the strength—to do so.

We receive that power by praying for someone who has hurt us,
praying for his or her well-being—
praying the way that Jesus prayed for his persecutors: “Father, forgive them.”

Another help to forgiveness is for us to confess our sins in the Sacrament of Penance.

There, we realize, profoundly, that as God has forgiven us, we should forgive others.

So, an encouragement:
Make the Sacrament of Penance a regular part of your life.

Catholics are obliged, as a minimum, to confess our grave sins at least once a year, because they are deadly, and because they keep us from the Eucharist.

But we are encouraged to confess all our sins—venial and mortal—regularly.

I think monthly confession is a worthy goal.

If you're not there yet, take some steps toward that goal.

Make a good confession and then try to go quarterly, and from there it's easier to get to once a month.

Confessions are heard, during Covid, on Wednesdays from 5:30 to 6:30 p.m.

If that isn't convenient, just let me know and I'll make myself available at another time.

IV.

An epilogue to Hatfields and McCoys.

The direct descendants of those families, Reo Hatfield and Ron McCoy, organized a reunion of the families in 2000.

In 2003, they signed a truce formally marking an end to the feud, and now a yearly festival commemorates it.

In fact, Reo Hatfield and Ron McCoy have become good friends.

Reconciliation is possible.

God commands us to forgive; Christ gives us his power to do so.