

THE POWER OF—
SAYING NO TO FORGIVENESS

We have an expression that we use to people all the time. We say: “Do the math.” It actually has nothing to do with math. It has everything to do with understanding and grasping what is really going on. When I say to you: To err is human, you fill in the rest by saying: to forgive divine. What goes around, comes around. Do unto others as, you would have them do unto you. That’s doing the math in the area of forgiveness.

Last month I received a letter from a man in prison in Pennsylvania. He introduced himself in the letter and said that he used to steal money from our candles here at St. Anthony’s. He never got caught for that and that is not why he was in prison. Others caught him stealing and that is why he is in prison. But in his letter he said that he had had a conversion experience, a change of heart. He now had his eyes opened and he sees what he did. And why it was wrong. And so in an effort to make amends he was writing to all the places from which he used to steal to apologize and to ask forgiveness. The letter was written in pencil on lined copybook paper. There was other information. About what he was hoping to do in the future when he got out.

Then there was a request for money from Saint Anthony’s to help him with his prison expenses and his provisions. I thought to myself “Well, I didn’t see that coming at first.” So do I forgive him in your names? Do I believe he has had a change of heart? Do I believe enough to send him some money? Remember: Fool me once shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me.” So I wrote him back. I thanked him for his letter. I accepted his apology and I deposited some of my own money, not parish money, in his JPal account. I believe that was the right thing to do. I could be very wrong. It is a risk. It is always a risk. Forgiveness is always a risk—but a risk worth taking.

Years ago I was called to the bedside of a man who had bad cancer and it was close to the end. I was called to anoint him and give him communion. He was talking about dying. I knew that he had had a very stormy and troubled relationship with his mom. She had hurt him terribly and suffered from mental illness. I asked him if he had spoken with her. He had not. I suggested that he could do something very lavish at this point in his life. Without her ever having said she was sorry he could extend a word of forgiveness to her as he left this world. A parting gift from a hurting son to a hurting mother. He said: “No. She is not invited to my funeral.”

I was really stunned. How can you accept the last anointing and last communion with a very forgiving God but then not extend some of that to the one person who stood most in need of being forgiven by him. Here's what I believe. None of us can bring our unforgiveness into the kingdom of heaven. Because there is no unforgiveness in heaven. If unforgiveness abides in my heart and soul then I cannot cross the threshold into the kingdom of God. I have to let it go. I have to forgive. Until I do, I am on the outside looking in. I'm not in hell. But I'm not in heaven either.

My friends, who are those most in need of our forgiveness? Why, it's our family. Not everyone but some. And some more than others. How many times have you asked Our Lord's forgiveness? And then sinned again? And then asked for his forgiveness again? How many times have we hated or manipulated people and then asked Our Lord's pardon. How many times have we lusted and coveted and grabbed? And then realized we were wrong and asked Our Lord to give us another chance? How many times? And then there is the gospel story about the guy who won't forgive someone indebted to him. Right after he has received forgiveness himself for a much larger debt. And we think. Who would do that? And I say: Look inside your soul for those places where you harbor hurts, where you stoke the flames. Jesus always makes his grace available to us. Always looks out and says, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do."

"Dad, Mom, Brother, Sister, Friend, Neighbor, Coworker—I forgive you for you knew not what you did to me." They may not be sorry. They may not even realize what they did to you. They make see it a whole different way. That is not the question. The question is: Will I extend an offer of forgiveness first as Jesus has to me? That is the question.