

Readings

Sir 27:30–28:7

Ps 103:1-2, 3-4, 9-10, 11-12

Rom 14:7-9

Mt 18:21-35

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On Friday, we remembered the 25th anniversary of the terrorist attack on our country. Many of us still have vivid memories of that day. I was living in New York and was preparing for a staff meeting when I heard the news. I didn't believe it at first but then turned on the television and saw the attacks unfold in New York, Washington and later in Pennsylvania. What might be your memories?

Those who did not live through that day may see the replays on the news and TV documentaries, or read about it in our history books. For family members, the memories of that day and the days to come bring to mind hurts, especially of the innocent loved ones who perished in the attacks and the first responders who died trying to save so many trapped victims. There are among the hurts of that day and later the unfinished business of not being able to have a chance to say final words.

It was a beautiful, clear day and suddenly tragedy, darkness and a cloud of toxic debris which included the remains of the dead overwhelmed us. In the midst of the questions and darkness there were signs of hope and compassion. People, sometimes strangers to one another helped, consoled, reached out to the survivors and to people in need in so many ways, big and small.

Unfortunately another darkness also emerged. Wrath and anger against members of the Arab/Muslim community and other foreigners who had nothing to do with the attack. They were accused simply due to their nationality and religion. That anger unfortunately motivated some people to blame and to lash out.

In some people, the anger and hurt are strong. Not just as we remember 9/11 – think of the many hurting people in our own country and throughout the world (Gaza, Israel, Ukraine, Russia, Iran, the Middle East, Haiti, Cuba, Sudan, the list goes on) today. Not just in the troubled areas of our world; this can happen in families and communities. How often do we choose to hold on to the hurts and the offenses of the past? Why? Is the memory of a past hurt so bad that it has not been able to heal? Is it that people feel they will one day get their justice, though it's revenge? Is it because they want to control those who offended them in some way?

The Wisdom of Sirach, our first reading, states explicitly: “Wrath and anger are hateful things, yet the sinner hugs them tight.” They do us no good. They do no one any good. They continue to fester and damage and harden the heart, embitter and divide people. Why do people choose to hold wrath and anger so tight?

The word of God not only decries the wrath and anger that may consume our hearts at times. It offers a way out. Compassion, Forgiveness. The overwhelming compassion of the king in the Gospel parable today. The king wanted to settle accounts with those who owed a debt to him. When the first debtor, who owed a huge debt, a debt that could never be repaid, is threatened with prison he cries out: “Be patient with me and I will pay you back in full.” The king, moved with compassion forgives the debt. The debtor, freed of his debt, leaves and goes about his business. And when he meets a fellow servant who owes him a debt, though a lot less,

he attacks the man, demands payment and throws him into prison until the debt is repaid. The compassion he was treated with did not touch his heart or change his attitude. He held on to the anger and wrath that had been festering in his heart, maybe for years.

The final line, the moral of the parable, so to speak: “So will my heavenly Father do to you unless each of you forgives your brother or sister from your heart.” We are called to forgive. We are called to let compassion guide our life choices.

We need to learn this virtue. We remember the many ways God has been compassionate with us. We need to learn compassion because we can choose and maybe at times do choose to hold on to past hurts and debts, and we let the anger harden our hearts. We need to learn to let go and in one sense to entrust them to God.

It can be hard to let go of some of the hurtful moments of our past but holding on to them does no one any good. Sometimes it may take a long time to be able to forgive. A recommendation to me from a spiritual director when I was holding on to anger and having a hard time forgiving: “Remember Jesus’ words to his persecutors from the cross. Jesus did not say: ‘I forgive you.’ Rather he said: ‘Father, forgive them.’” God, who indeed is merciful, slow to anger and rich in compassion, will forgive and bring us the peace we so need when we are able to forgive.