

Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity

September 17, 2017

Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass

of

St. Thomas More Catholic Parish

celebrated at

St. Joseph Catholic Church

116 Theodore St.

Scranton, PA 18508

Matthew 18:21-35

More than 150 years ago my great-great-great-grandfather, Moses Haldeman, bought a farm in Bucks County, just outside Doylestown, that my cousin Tommy still farms to this day. Moses had a brother, William Harrison Haldeman, who enlisted in the United States Army in the summer of 1862. His unit, made up of men from Bucks and Philadelphia Counties, saw its first combat 155 years ago today, at the Battle of Antietam, where my uncle was killed in the cornfield and buried in a mass grave, because his body could not be identified by the confederate soldiers who at the end of the day held the ground he died on. He is among those listed as killed at Antietam, but for whom there is no marker at the massive cemetery just outside Sharpsburg, Maryland. My personal intention at Mass today is for the repose of his soul.

I share this bit of family history with you because I have noticed of late that there are a lot of people in this country who still hold a grudge against the people who killed my uncle, and the 365,000 other soldiers in the Federal forces who died during the American Civil War. Without being prideful, I can assure you that my family has never done this, has never held this grudge. Though my family has lived in Pennsylvania since 1728, my mother and three of her children were born in the South, my parents met and got married in the South, and my grandfather and I went to school in the South. My uncle's death at Antietam has not been forgotten. It's simply been forgiven.

Our Gospel today makes clear that forgiveness is what confers moral authority. Jesus says we are to forgive our brother not seven times, but 490 times, not expecting that anyone would actually count the offenses until he reached a number whereby forgiveness was no longer necessary. Forgiveness is required of us because forgiveness has been granted to us. As the king says in today's parable, "Should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?" Whatever offenses we have had to endure, there is none we are allowed to hold onto, no grudges are to be nursed, because all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. And, of course, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for the ungodly.

The moral man is the one who can bear wrongs patiently and forgive sins readily. If last week we were exhorted by the Gospel to reprove the sinner, to fulfill the first spiritual act of mercy, this week we are called by Jesus to do two more spiritual works of mercy. Bearing wrongs patiently and forgiving sins readily are both our duty, because God is patient with us in all our wrongs, and God readily forgives all our sins.

Since this is true and so obviously the will of the Son of God, according to the Gospel we just heard, we must be careful that we do not fall into the posture now blessed by large swaths of our nation's establishment. That is, in this new anti-Christian paradigm, moral authority is not conferred by God based on our readiness to forgive. Rather one assumes the moral high ground by having a grievance, by being a victim, by claiming oppression, by holding a grudge. In our morally inverted world, forgiveness is no longer necessary and certainly not lauded. Instead, remembering every offense committed against us and our ancestors is valued, all the more if these memories serve to silence our opponents, regardless of whether they had anything at all to do with the original offense. The new rule of thumb is that we will not forgive those who wronged our ancestors

and wronged us, and we will visit this spirit of vengeance upon those we think might be related to those who first hurt our family, or first hurt us.

I don't pretend to know what these vengeance peddlers are after, but I am certain that their strategy for claiming the moral high ground will not issue in comity and reconciliation. Their anger and resentment are not a recipe for national reconciliation, but a recipe for igniting another civil war. Their refusal to forgive past wrongs, both those they've endured and those their ancestors suffered, is demonic. Their refusal to forgive makes them moral midgets, yet they are encouraged in their moral inversion by countless politicians and academics, as well as their abettors in the press.

The fact that someone has been wronged does not automatically make him right. It just means that, like Jesus, he has suffered because of human sin. What made Jesus so right was not His victimhood, but that he prayed for those who persecuted Him and forgave from the cross the very people who had nailed Him to the tree. Jesus would not be an example had He held a grudge. Jesus is an example because He forgave from His heart all the sins of the world. The purveyors of vengeance have few examples to follow since they so often meet untimely deaths themselves. Those who live by the sword die by the sword. Yet vengeance is still promoted.

The Church can be the example the world so needs right now. Rather than happily play the role of him who is forgiven an insurmountable debt, only to strangle his neighbor over a couple of hundred bucks, Catholics can show how former adversaries come to love and trust one another. When Bishop Morlino was here, I mentioned the incredible cultural diversity encompassed by our parish and I concentrated on the international component, our parishioners from Panama, Benin, Canada, Jamaica, Colombia, and Italy. I could have also talked about the southerners who are members of our parish, how we are united not by our mutual grievances, but by our faith that teaches us to let go of past wrongs and work together to build up our Holy Mother, the Church.

Having forgiven what happened to our families 155 years ago, today we are presented with a new challenge. We see vengeance peddlers pulling down monuments, the Lincoln Memorial vandalized, and people claiming to be anti-fascist who assault the peaceful protesters and the police sent to protect them, all the while destroying property in cities across the nation. And, yes, we've seen actual, self-identified fascists running over people with their cars. Those culprits need to be restrained; we need to protect society from them, and that will mean arrests and jailtime. But we must also forgive them, or we risk becoming like them. As wrong as they are, and as insane as their actions appear, they are nevertheless children of God, made in His image, people for whom Christ died. We must be careful how we speak about them, lest one of our non-Catholic neighbors imagine those criminals haven't been forgiven or take from us that what they're doing to our country right now is unforgivable. The eternal debt for their sins has already been paid. They may have reparation to make, but they have been forgiven, and if they turn from their wickedness, they might yet live.

Fifty years after our forebears slaughtered each other for four years, veterans from across the country met at battlefields and helped dedicate monuments to the other side, while fraternizing with their former enemies. The men who had actually fought the battles wanted to forgive each other, and they didn't want to see their children die in the same sort of conflict in which they themselves had suffered, the conflict in which they'd watched their brothers die. What happened to my uncle 155 years ago today can't be our desire for any of our children. He was dead at 21. We can't want that for anyone. We can begin avoiding that tragedy in our own day by forgiving our adversaries from our hearts right now.