

**Fr. Nick Dant's Homily, Saint Matthew Catholic Church, Indianapolis
Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Sept. 12-13, 2020, Cycle A**

Consider this tale: a woman who suffered domestic violence at the hands of her husband expressed that she felt she could not forgive her husband for the abuse he perpetrated upon her. The whole idea of forgiveness was a real struggle for her. She said: "As a Catholic, I felt I had a moral responsibility and obligation to forgive (my husband) for his violence at the moment he was about to murder me. I believed I had to imitate Jesus' final act of love during his crucifixion. I worried that rather than feeling forgiveness I might feel hatred in my heart and that my last words would be to condemn (my husband) to hell for all eternity. I feared that if I failed to forgive him completely before I died, then I might end up in hell myself."

Let us go back to Peter in our Gospel story! Peter asks Jesus: "Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive? As many as seven times?" Peter was being quite genuine. Seven in Hebrew piety is a very sacred number. Seven stood for wholeness, completeness, perfection. Peter thought he was quite generous – to forgive seven times would be perfect forgiveness. Undoubtedly, Peter was astounded at the answer Jesus gave: "I say to you, not seven times but seventy-seven times." In Hebrew thought "seventy-seven times" means you always forgive your brother or sister.

There is a dangerous side to Jesus' teaching to forgive endless number of times. What if I am not ready to forgive, or even able to forgive? What happens when the offer of forgiveness is not met with repentance on the part of the offender – or to make restitution for the evil inflicted?

This weekend as we remember 9-11-2001 when criminal and violent acts were perpetrated on thousands of innocent people in New York, Pennsylvania, and Washington D.C., Jesus' teaching of the endless forgiveness confronts us all with a challenge that seems almost impossible. When asked: "How many times must we forgive?", the tragic memories of 9/11 flood our minds with all the evil visited upon so many innocent people whose lives were ended or forever disrupted.

As we remember those tragic events that happened on September 11, 2001 – what do the words that ring out to us this weekend from the Old Testament Book of Sirach mean to us? Sirach proclaims:

"Wrath and anger are hateful things..."

"The vengeful will suffer the Lord's vengeance..."

"Forgive your neighbor's injustice, then when you pray, your sins will be forgiven..."

"Set enmity aside..."

"Hate not your neighbor..."

What does forgiveness mean; what does being "not vengeful" mean in the face of the monstrous evil visited upon us as a people on that fateful day of September 2001? My friends, I have no simple answers that will settle once and for all how we are to live out the gospel of Jesus Christ. In the face of the tragedy of 9/11, and in the face of Jesus' challenge to reach out in reconciliation always to those who harm us, my deep poverty of spirit and poverty of intellect stands out in the starkest relief! In the poverty of mind and spirit and in humility, I ask God in His infinite wisdom to help me put it all together.

What I do know is that our Gospel passage from Matthew challenges us to continue to reflect on what a Christian response might be when we are deliberately harmed by others. Maybe we can take our cue from our U.S. Bishops who have called upon us to make the remembering of 9/11 -

A time for prayer: for victims and families; for leaders; for the military; for an end to violence; and for our adversaries as well.

A time for fasting: for justice, peace and the protection of innocent life.

A time for teaching: to better learn Catholic teaching on war and peace.

A time for dialogue: with Muslims, Jews, fellow Christians and other faith communities.

A time for witness: to live our values of mutual respect, human dignity, respect for life and security without resorting to discrimination.

A time for service: to continue to provide assistance to those still hurting here and abroad.

A time for solidarity: with all who live under the threat of violence and uncertainty each day. And...

A time for hope: in God's grace, in ourselves, and in one another.