

Reflection for September 16-17, 2017
24th Sunday in Ordinary Time

If you've grown up as a Catholic, it's easy to take forgiveness for granted. At least for ourselves. We've been reassured since we were children that God will forgive our sins. We even have a special means to achieve this through the Sacrament of Reconciliation. It's very comforting.

It's not so easy though, is it, when it's not God doing the forgiving; when it is us called to do it. We might be able to forgive some things even though they still hurt, things like thoughtless remarks or not being thanked for something; even being left out of a social gathering. But how do you forgive someone who has harmed a family member, or damaged your reputation? How can a young person forgive a generation for failing to act to combat climate change, or end discrimination, poverty and war?

Jesus must have known that reacting to a wrongdoing and moving beyond it to forgive would be difficult for us. In last week's Gospel, we were shown how to handle it if someone commits an offense against us. He gave us pretty detailed instructions to help us help the other person understand the problem, and the hurt, and to make the inner changes necessary, thereby restoring relationship.

This week, Matthew's Gospel focuses on the inner work that the person who has been wronged is required to do. Jesus lays a big responsibility at our feet. He makes it clear to us that restoring a right relationship is not just a one-sided transaction. It takes work by both parties.

Forgiveness must be about the hardest thing Jesus asks of his followers as he gives us so many chances. To the Apostles' astonishment, he said we have to forgive, not once, not seven times but seventy seven times. There is just no mistaking - we can't ignore this.

I had an experience a few years ago that is one of the reasons I ended up here at St. Joe's. I felt very hurt by comments directed to me about something I strongly believed in. It was very painful, unexpected and ended up being pivotal in my faith journey in many ways. Over time, I was able to think about

this person without thinking dark thoughts, and eventually interact in a friendly way without getting riled up all over again. But I have to admit, every once in a while, if I revisit the series of events, the emotions still hit me again, almost as raw and painful as the first time. I thought I had gotten over it and forgiven but I know I am not there yet. It may take more than 77 times.

Perhaps that is why Jesus used such a large number although of course the actual number doesn't matter. He knew that it would take time and possibly many attempts for us to temper hurt and head towards forgiveness.

I heard a discussion on CBC radio last week about apologies and what constitutes a **good** apology. The most important thing is to say "I'm sorry" or "I apologize" because, that way, **you** own the action and offence. When we say things like "I regret that so and so found my remarks offensive", it puts the responsibility for how things turned out on the recipient not the doer.

We probably all have heard politicians or celebrities make bad "apologies". We all know it when we hear it. We also know when we have heard a **good** apology. One is hollow, and sounds like something a lawyer might advise a client to say to avoid a lawsuit. The other is heartfelt, heart wrenching and humble.

The same thing with acts of forgiveness. When you witness the real thing, it is unmistakable. It can take your breath away or bring tears to your eyes. It has real power and has a way of staying with you. Perhaps that's because we wonder and maybe doubt that we could do the same.

There is a very beautiful and powerful **local** example of a true apology, loving forgiveness and restoring of right relationship. You may recall the tragic death last year of acclaimed Inuk artist Annie Pootoogook. Her body was found on the banks of the Rideau River in September 2016. The circumstances of her death are still under investigation. Annie and her partner were well known by some of the folks who volunteer at the Supper Table because they were fairly regular guests there for a time.

Shortly after Annie died, Ottawa police Sgt. Chris Hrnchiar posted racist comments on Twitter about the circumstances of her death. Veldon Coburn,

the Algonquin man who had adopted one of Annie's children a few years previous, saw the comments, called him out about them over Twitter and complained to the mayor and the chief of police. After an investigation by the Ottawa Police Service, he was disciplined.

To his great credit, Sgt. Hrnchiar pleaded guilty to discreditable conduct and showed great remorse at his disciplinary hearing. One of the disciplinary measures that were imposed was the requirement that he take sensitivity training. While others might have grudgingly gone along with it and done the basic minimum with little commitment to change, he took it very seriously. He wrote letters of apology to Mr. Coburn and to the local indigenous and Inuit communities. With support, he also approached the local Inuit and aboriginal communities to learn more about them, their history and to try and make things right. Some welcomed him; some were not quite so ready, yet.

Sgt. Hrnchiar finally got an opportunity to apologize to Veldon Coburn in person. But instead of being met with a stony face, he was greeted with outstretched arms, a tearful, loving embrace and expression of concern about how he was doing. There is a beautiful photo on the CBC website with Mr. Coburn's arm around Sgt. Hrnchiar's shoulder moments after they met. It brought tears to my eyes and I still get emotional thinking about it. Sgt. Hrnchiar is still continuing his journey towards reconciliation, having received the gift of forgiveness. And from what I've read, it seems like he and Veldon Coburn have become friends.

Sirach says in today's first reading, "Do not be angry with your neighbor... overlook faults" and "forgive your neighbour the wrong that is done and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray". Jesus' teaching together with powerful real-life models like Chris Hrnchiar and Veldon Coburn, can hopefully set us all on a path to genuine forgiveness and reconciliation in our own lives.