

WHY NO FORGIVENESS?

“Wrath and anger are hateful things and yet the sinner hugs them tight.” Those words were written down around 2200 years ago somewhere in Alexandria, Egypt by a Jewish sage. They are found in the Book of Sirach in the Old Testament. The sentence has two parts: wrath and anger—hateful things. Yes, they are. The sinner hugs them to himself. Yes, he does. As old as they are these words still sound true.

Are you sensing any wrath and anger in our country at this present moment? Are you sensing any wrath and anger in the Church at the present time? I am on social media a decent amount of time and I, like you, have to wade through all kinds of words. Harsh language, accusations of all kinds, hateful discourse, exaggerated and false claims, judgmental attitudes, condemnatory comments. And hidden somewhere in all of this there may actually be some measure of the truth.

No one is spared. Not the Pope. Not the President. Not House and Senate political leaders. Not bishops. Not priests. Not governors. Not local political leaders. Not business leaders. There is a lot of venom. You might think that none of those mentioned should be spared. For all the wrong they have done. There is also a lot of self-righteousness and feelings of being justified in holding such intense feelings. This is a dangerous time. And the pandemic has given us more time to ourselves and more time engaged in the digital world where so much of this exists and is unfiltered. There is a passion for revenge that appears here and there online but also begins to show itself right in our own families.

Ask yourself: Have you heard many calls for people to lower the decibels, soften the rhetoric, strive to listen with a truly open mind and heart? Have you heard many requests to treat others with respect even when you disagree strongly with their viewpoint? Have you heard many calls for people to forgive the other for a wrong done? Only occasionally. That is the voice of Our Lord trying to be heard in the din of angry and wrathful voices. We have to be very careful.

I have asked myself this question: Why no forgiveness? Why does it seem that forgiveness is in such short supply? One of the reasons that occurred to me is that as a culture and as a church many people have lost a sense of personal sin. By that I mean my own personal sin or your own personal sin. There is still a strong sense of sin but only yours—not mine. I haven’t sinned. You have sinned. The trouble with such an attitude is twofold. First, it isn’t true. None of us is sinless. I sin. You sin. And secondly, if I don’t acknowledge my own sin then an immediate corollary is that I have no need to be forgiven. No personal sin in me. No need to ask for forgiveness.

Ah, but if I do not need forgiveness and therefore do not experience forgiveness then I will not have within me the ability or capacity to offer forgiveness and extend forgiveness. It is out of my own having experienced forgiveness that I find the forgiveness I offer to the other. My

denying my personal sin is the very thing that cancels out my ability or desire to offer forgiveness.

Forgiveness is hard, very hard and yet we forgive people all the time. Every time we say to someone, “Don’t worry about it, it’s okay” we offer some sort of forgiveness. Again, Sirach, says that it makes no sense to refuse mercy to one person and at the same time to expect to receive mercy from another. No, it does not make sense. The psalm reminds us that: The Lord is kind and merciful, slow to anger and rich in compassion. To us. To all. But the story that Jesus tells, about the merciful king is unusual. The king is merciful and forgiving. Completely. But when the servant who has begged for more time is himself unmerciful to another, in that very moment the unmerciful one forfeits the mercy and forgiveness he has received and then finds himself still imprisoned in his debt. His whole debt is re-instated by the king who offered to forgive. Remember the Lord’s Prayer: Forgive us as we forgive. How many thousands of times have you prayed that prayer? Do you think the Lord will not hold you to it?

My friends, to lead with forgiveness is to lead with love. Actually forgiveness is what love looks like once sin enters the picture. So we are invited to send out forgiveness from our hearts. We are to send our forgiveness on an errand of mercy seeking a welcoming abode. The only truly welcoming abode is a contrite heart. If your forgiveness finds such repentance and sorrow it will enter and abide. If not, it will return to you. Like love, our capacity to forgive is unlimited. Whether it will be accepted or not is not up to us. That is in the Lord’s hands—always. It is for us to offer; even when someone nails us to a cross. In our Church and in our world the message of Jesus Christ from the cross—his own last will and testament—has not been discarded or eliminated. His message applies now even more than before. And we must make no mistake, the Lord will hold us to account especially in the area of forgiveness. A lot is riding on this attitude and this approach. Let no one delude you in this matter. Do not hug tightly, wrath and anger. Ever.

May the Lord bless us today and give us his peace.