

## Commentary on the Gospel for Mon, Nov 10th 2014

In a class not long ago, a student asked me what single behavior was the most important for a Catholic to practice, in order to be faithful to the Christian vocation. I am not sure what the young person was expecting me to say – certainly one could quote the Gospel about the greatest commandment that we heard recently at Mass, but I suggested an answer that could be better drawn from today's Gospel text instead. I told the questioner that THE behavior most critical for a Christian is forgiveness. The behavior that identifies one as a disciple of Jesus more than any other is forgiveness. The only activity demanded by Jesus an infinite number of times per day? Again it is forgiveness. We are not required to pray seven times a day, we are not required to receive any sacrament with such frequency, in fact no single action is more intensely or regularly demanded by Jesus throughout all the Gospel accounts, nor is any action more perfectly witnessed to by Jesus than forgiveness.

I would go so far as to say that if one consistently refuses to forgive, one cannot call him or herself a Christian – a Christ follower. I would argue that it is the only condition that Jesus places upon our salvation (“forgive us as we forgive those . . .”). Wait, what about Baptism? Don't the Scriptures report that one must be baptized to enter the Kingdom of God? What is Baptism but ultimate forgiveness – received first and then offered to others. To be baptized means to forgive and to seek forgiveness.

The Letter from Paul to Titus which serves as the first reading in today's liturgy is not so explicit about forgiveness as the Gospel passage, but one must assume that if a person is hospitable, a lover of goodness, morally blameless, having only one wife and reasonably obedient children, competent in sound doctrine, temperate, just, holy and self-controlled, it would be very likely that he is above all, forgiving. This description of a candidate for the episcopacy reminds me of the lists that Pope Francis has delineated for men to be called to the episcopate – and it should give all of us pause to consider that a bishop will be no better than the community of believers that he is appointed to serve. If we call one another to those characteristics, then surely one of us will receive the call to servant leadership in the very challenging role of Bishop in today's contentious Church. Perhaps we have to highlight once again that in an era and culture of contentiousness, forgiveness is the only recourse that enables peacemaking, dialogue, discernment – those behaviors that we need to competently follow Jesus and serve His mission of salvation.

So I vote for forgiveness as the one behavior without which one cannot participate in God's Reign. Today is a good day to look around and decide from whom we need to seek forgiveness or to whom we need to extend forgiveness.

As I ended my prayer on these texts the Holy Spirit reminded me that St. Leo the Great (circa 440

A.D.), whose feast we observe today, was famous for being a wonderful Bishop of Rome. His most memorable act as pope was walking out to the gates of Rome to meet Attila the Hun and his hoard of warriors – and single handedly turning them from their intended course of sacking, pillaging and burning the city of Rome. His effort was an extraordinarily courageous act of peacemaking on behalf of the people of his diocese. Maybe the Attila of our own hearts is the refusal to forgive someone. It threatens to destroy our compassion and disrupt our peace, and burn out all our virtues. Like Leo, each one of us can face this ruthless warrior of anger, bitterness or revenge, and count on Christ's mercy to dispel it from our hearts so that we may be open to the fullness of forgiveness from the Lord who pleads from the Cross: "Father, forgive them, they do not know what they do."

Eileen Burke-Sullivan - Creighton's Division of Mission and Ministry