

Ordinary 7
2.23.25

When we come to Sunday Mass, we usually hope to hear words of comfort and consolation in both the readings and the homily. This is not one of those Sundays. The scripture passages we hear are difficult, challenging, even shocking to some degree. But perhaps the following story will bring clarity to the gospel challenge we just heard.

I'm guessing you've never heard of Freddy Muntanguha. Freddy is a Tutsi from Rwanda. He was 18 years old when in 1994 over one million Tutsis were slaughtered in a Hutu-led genocide in that nation. Freddy and his sister were the only members of his family to survive. They did so by hiding in the roof of a neighbor's house. Here's how Freddy described about that horror.

In April 1994 we saw militias organizing themselves near my village; some were our neighbors who had been given weapons. Soon they started establishing roadblocks and killing people on the street. We were full of fear. I was hiding at a neighbor's house when my mother came to see me. She brought me all the food she had left – vegetables and passion fruit. She was different that day and didn't talk much. She just said, "If you survive, I want you to be strong, to be a man". These were her last words.... The passion fruit has become my memory of my mother.

The following day at 11am I heard a large group of militias go to our house. They took everyone and they killed them with clubs and machetes. I could hear the screaming and my sisters calling my name. It took about 15 minutes until I realized that all had died – my mother, my father, four of my sisters, together with 80 members of my extended family. It is so terrible to listen to your family being killed. You want to go and help but you're powerless. (These) terrible sounds (still) come to me in my nightmares.

The genocide destroyed the very fabric of our country because doctors, lawyers and teachers (like my mother) were either killed or became perpetrators themselves.... The killers who came to attack our home were people we knew well. The person who took and slaughtered my mother was a student at the school where she taught. At some point, whether at school or in his home, he learned to hate. Most of his family were also involved in the genocide.

Those of us who survived were left traumatized and without hope. I thought how on earth can I live without my family, but I kept hearing my mother's voice telling me to be a man. She wanted me to have courage and to lead a better life. These were the values my mother left me, and they have saved me.

After the genocide the group who attacked our house were caught and imprisoned; but most are now released. This is why forgiveness is so important. We can't rebuild this nation without forgiveness. As survivors, we need to combine our energy to develop Rwanda, and part of this means forgiving the perpetrators, many of whom are back living among us. We are the only ones with the authority to do this. Through grass roots initiatives some perpetrators have had the courage to ask for forgiveness and there are even reconciliation villages to support this.

It was after having a family of my own that I realized our country's future depended on us survivors looking forward. Forgiveness is not only for the perpetrators it's for us too because otherwise carrying the heavy burden of anger and hopelessness will start to kill us, and even get into our children's DNA. So, I began by loving myself, and then considered how I could forgive the perpetrators. You can't teach forgiveness. You can only experience it. And for me, it took 17 years to imagine how to forgive.

When you embark on the journey of forgiveness there are a lot of pushbacks and while I haven't yet forgiven the person who killed my family, in my heart I have received all the benefits of forgiveness, because I don't hate him and I hold him no ill will. (taken from The Forgiveness Project archives)

Freddy teaches us several lessons about hate and forgiveness. He reminds us that investing in hate only reaps more hate. Investing in forgiveness leads to freedom and a greater hope.

Second, he teaches us that forgiveness is a process. With traumatic events, it is not usually possible to forgive immediately. And forgiveness often comes in baby steps. Freddy relates that we begin to forgive only as we are able. Greater forgiveness often comes in time.

In the set-up to the first reading we hear today, we are told that Saul is trying to kill David and has been planning to do that for some time. Today's passage picks up the story where David is given the opportunity to kill Saul. But he does not do so. Despite the threats he received from Saul, David understood that the presence of God was with Saul. For that reason, David would never harm Saul.

In today's gospel, we hear the "hard sayings" of Jesus - ***love those who hate us. Pray for our persecutors. Lend without expecting repayment.*** These sayings may seem fanciful and unrealistic. But we already practice them to some degree with our families.

Parents, some of you have heard your children say they hate you. Perhaps its because you wouldn't let them do what they wanted or because you had to discipline them for something they did. Despite such a hurtful outburst, you still love your children. You may not like them at that moment, but you still love them.

Also, what you invest in your children – financially, time-wise and energy-wise – is something your children can never repay you for. But you make that investment anyway, and you do so out of love.

This is the kind of love and attention Jesus is asking us to give to others. He can demand that since that's how God loves us. While difficult, if not impossible at times, Jesus sums it up with the statement: ***the measure with which you measure will in turn be measured back to you.***



In January of 1984, Time magazine ran a picture that was unimaginable and almost heart-stopping. It was a picture of Pope John Paul II and Ali Agca. Ali Agca tried to assassinate Pope John Paul II by shooting him while he was riding in the popemobile in St. Peter's Square. It was a miracle that Pope John Paul II survived.

Years after that assassination attempt, Pope John Paul II sat down with Ali Agca in his prison cell. He spoke words of forgiveness, even though there was a good chance that Ali Agca was not sorry for what he had done. The pope finished by pledging to pray for his assailant every day.

Time, a secular magazine, said this about that sacred encounter: ***The scene in (that prison cell) had a symbolic splendor. It shone in lovely contrast to what the world has witnessed lately in the news. For some time, a suspicion has taken hold that the***

trajectory of history is descendant, that the world moves from disorder to greater disorder, toward darkness.... The symbolism of the pictures from (that encounter between Pope John Paul II and Ali Agca) is precisely the Christian message, that people can be redeemed.... In a less exalted sense, the scene may be important because it suggests that human beings can respond to inhuman acts by being sane and civilized and forbearing, more decent, perhaps, than the killers deserve.

The sayings of Jesus in today's gospel are hard to hear. They are even more difficult to put into practice. Also, I can only imagine how hard it was for David not to seek revenge on Saul who had been trying to kill him. But with God's grace, it is certainly possible to do what seems, at first, to be impossible.

I'll finish with this image. Every Saturday morning, dozens of you line up for confession here at the parish. When you enter that confessional, you expect Father Zach and me to help you come to terms with your sin. You expect to hear the words of mercy and forgiveness from God. You would never expect to hear or experience anything LESS than that. In the same way as you expect nothing less than complete mercy from God and from your parish priests, so must you do for others. To help us undertake that huge task, may the scripture verse we heard today be on our lips. And, more important, may it be what we live from our hearts: ***the measure you measure with will in turn be measured back to you.***

Amen? Amen!