

Thursday, Nineteenth Week in Ordinary Time

REFLECTION

Matthew 18:21-19:1

‘How often must I forgive my brother?’

Forgiving someone who has wronged us does not come naturally to us. Learning to forgive those who have hurt us is probably one of the greatest challenges in life. Peter’s question to Jesus reveals how difficult it is to forgive someone, *‘How often must I forgive my brother?’* The implication behind this question is that there has to be a limit to forgiveness. Peter answers his own question suggesting what he considered generous, *‘As often as seven times?’* In the Jewish tradition, seven was the perfect number, so forgiving someone seven times suggests perfect forgiveness. It looks like Peter was hoping Jesus would say, *‘Not as often as seven!’* Instead, Jesus answers Peter’s question in a way that must have amazed Peter and the other disciples. Jesus in fact asks more, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. In other words, there is to be no limit to our willingness to forgive. Jesus underpins this very challenging call with the parable featuring a servant who received the gift of forgiveness from his master but then refused to pass on that same gift to a fellow servant. It is a parable which both celebrates God’s readiness to forgive us whenever we ask for forgiveness but also a parable which challenges us to be as ready to forgive each other as God is to forgive us. Jesus suggests that the gift of forgiveness which we receive from God obliges us to pass on that very gift to others when it is asked for. The mercy that God freely pours into our lives must flow through us to touch others. This is what the servant who was forgiven failed to do. One of the sayings of Jesus expresses the message of today’s parable very succinctly, *‘Be merciful as your Father is merciful’*.