

June 26, 2022 Fr. John Homily

JMJ CHS

My mom and dad's wedding anniversary is this coming Wednesday. They were married in 1946 so it would have been 76 years. My dad had just returned from the war and proposed to Anna Skupien of Nanty Glo, Pennsylvania which is in coal country near Johnstown.

My mom was a farm girl and she had a hard life. Her dad was a coal miner and her mom ran the farm with the help of her kids. Six daughters and two sons. And I am sure my mom wrung the necks of chickens and perhaps even slaughtered other animals as well. My dad, on the other hand, well, he was a city boy and he couldn't hurt a fly. He would have rescued the chicken and raised it as a pet.

Now I inherited my dad's genes, not my mom's. If I was Elisha the prophet, I could not have slaughtered those 12 poor unfortunate oxen. I would have sent them to an animal rescue shelter, maybe to be adopted by some nice family. And I certainly would not have been a very good priest at the temple in Jerusalem. It was where the priests slaughtered the little baby lambs every year for the Passover meal.

(But I just wanted to say that I did a little symbolic act here this past week. You recall that last year was my 20th anniversary as a priest and you gave me that beautiful Chalice as a gift. I took my mother's wedding ring and embedded it into the base of my chalice. This has been a tradition among some priests so I thought I would try it myself with some of the jewelry making skills that I learned in art school almost 50 years ago. Happy anniversary mom and dad.)

Well, I wondered if there was a theme that we could have used from today's readings. We do have plowing in that first reading. The Psalm mentions a yoke that the oxen wore over their shoulders. And in the Gospel, it is the last example of some of the big demands Jesus made on anyone who would wish to be His disciple. The way it was put there in the Gospel was that if there is anybody who has chosen to follow Him, but who continues to look over his shoulder, he is like the man plowing. You have to look forward, not backward. Otherwise, as Jesus said, you are not fit for the kingdom of God.

Some years ago I found occasion to use this very Gospel to gently admonish this Parish after a time of trouble. The previous pastor had some problems and a lot of feelings were hurt; and some of the parishioners wanted to cling to those hurts. I was inspired to share a few thoughts based on Jesus' admonition to the people of looking backward. I told them to GET OVER IT! Don't be like the plowman looking over his shoulder. We are now in a new era here at Holy Spirit. Let's put our hands to the plow and look forward, not backward.

One of the principal players in the Parish crisis came up to me after Mass and told me that my message hit home. He was spending a lot of time looking back and re-living his hurts. But he said that he was now resolved, from that point on, to only look forward. As a matter of fact, a lot of people must have taken that message to heart because I got a special souvenir out of that one-liner. The Women's Guild had a sweatshirt made for me. And across the chest, in embroidered big bold letters, it said, GET OVER IT!

I think this is actually good universal advice. There are so many different things in life that hurt our feelings or wound us in one way or another. And all too often, we like to

cling to them. But, we should forgive and forget. Pick yourself up. Dust yourself off. Start all over again. Don't stand still. Move forward. Not backward.

This past week I had a little extra time in my office and so I chose to watch, at random, an episode from *The Chosen*. And wouldn't ya know it, it was about plowing. And ultimately the message was the same as in today's Gospel. I think the episode was called TROUBLE if you wanted to look it up.

But Jesus and his disciples were in Samaria, that "no man's land" south of Galilee and north of Jerusalem. This was enemy territory. Jesus asks the brothers James and John to plow a field. They didn't complain and they didn't ask any questions. They were honored to be chosen by the master for the task. But when they had finished, Jesus revealed to them that they had just restored the garden of a Samaritan man who was crippled and who could no longer make his living by farming. They were a bit upset with Jesus. It was implied that if they had known who they were plowing for, they might have said 'absolutely not, he's our enemy.'

And a little later when some Samaritan men literally spit on Jesus and his disciples, James and John reacted very strongly and asked if they could use their new authority to call down fire and brimstone upon those rude Samaritans. But Jesus admonished them. He basically said, GET OVER IT you guys. The healing of the nations has to begin somewhere. How about if it began with you? We are here to plant seeds that will bear fruit for generations to come. But if you want to be my disciples, you are going to have to change your attitudes. You are going to have to give it up... and GET OVER IT! You have to forgive, and forget, and look forward into the future... with love being your guide.

Yes, you must love your enemies, and do good to those who persecute you.

And so, slowly but surely, with much practice of patience and endurance, the stiff-necked disciples began to.....get it. They did change. Their stony hearts were transformed into .....hearts of flesh.

At the very heart of "getting over it" is the willingness to forgive. Jesus was quite revolutionary in his teachings. Remember what he said: "Love your enemies. Do good to those who persecute you, and if you do not forgive, how can you expect your Heavenly Father to forgive you your sins"

I heard this incredible story recently that I would like to share with you now. More than any other story I have ever heard, I think that it very clearly illustrates this most difficult and challenging concept. But a little bit of background first. Did you know that nobody ever came to Jesus and asked for forgiveness? Every instance of Jesus forgiving sin was proactive on his part. To the crippled man who was lowered down through the roof, Jesus said, "Your sins are forgiven". To the woman caught in adultery he says, "I do not condemn you. But, go and sin no more." Forgiveness. To the woman who was delivered from seven demons and came to wash the feet of Jesus, He says to her, "Your faith has saved you" In other words, you are forgiven. And, of course, the biggest example of all, from the Cross. "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do."

OK, now the story. A Lutheran pastor, living with his family in the Soviet Union during the Cold War, hears the dreaded knock on the door in the middle of the night. The communist guards take him away to the Gulag where he is interrogated and beaten.

One guard in particular has it in for him. He wasn't named but let's call him... Vladimir. Vladimir is merciless. He works the night shift and he continuously wakes this prisoner up from a deep sleep, interrogates and beats him to the point of despair.

The pastor cries out to God, "what am I to do?"

A voice comes back. "forgive him."

"What? Him? You've got to be kidding."

"I'm not. You must forgive him."

"But he doesn't even want to be forgiven"

"Forgive him anyway."

So the pastor obeys the voice of his master and interiorly forgives Vladimir.

The guard begins to change. He allows the pastor to call his family. Initially the guard says that he would do all the talking. But when someone answered the phone, the guard quickly handed the phone over to the pastor. The man's wife was not home. He talks to his children. The guard allowed five more phone calls that night before the man finally connects with his wife.

The guard begins to feed the pastor, with his own food, making sure that the pastor didn't tell anybody about these favors. If the word got out the guard would be in trouble.

Finally, The guard allows his prisoner to take a hot bath in the officers quarters. Can you imagine? A hot bath for a prisoner in a concentration camp? Unheard of!

We don't know if the guard ever converted but it sure seems as if Jesus, through this story, wants to teach us a lesson about forgiveness. We all have to be as proactive as Jesus was. We have to say, interiorly, in our hearts, to the others who offend us or hurt us in any way, "Ego te absolve. Your sins are forgiven."

Yes, the story would seem to say that you too, the laity, can use the very same words that we priests use with you, in the confessional, to forgive the sinner.

~Fr. John