

FORGIVENESS: GIVEN, NOT EARNED

How many times are we to forgive? This isn't the real question. The real question is, how often do we want to be forgiven? We all need forgiveness and we all want to be forgiven. Yet, it is not easy. We do not see a lot of examples of forgiveness in our society. We do not see persons on opposite sides of issues forgiving one another. There is a deep seeded undercurrent that challenges us to be compassionate and forgiving of others. In the Gospel today we hear how the master was moved with compassion. Later we hear how the master is disappointed that the servant could not treat another with the same compassion he himself received. What we have been given we are to freely give. It begins with sharing a compassion that can lead to forgiveness. What we receive is so great; it is so vast.

There are movies we have all seen that have left a deep impression on us. For me one of those movies is "Cry Freedom". It is a Richard Attenborough film about the life and death of Steven Biko of South Africa. Denzel Washington portrays a black activist who befriends a white newspaper editor at the time of apartheid. It is based on a true story of a book and picture that were smuggled out of South Africa by the white editor after he was banned for the things he wrote. I can remember seeing the inequality play out on the screen. I had witnessed some of it firsthand when I was in South Africa in my twenties and this film brought me back to deep reflection. It invites the viewer to look at how hope is formed. We live in a time of racial tension and there is civil unrest. This film doesn't give a way out or provide answers for these struggles, but it offers the viewer a chance to reflect on the starting point of our lives; one that we do not have control over.

I cannot change the fact that I was born to Roman Catholic parents who moved out of the city to raise their children in the suburbs. I had no control over being born in the late 1950s. No one who comes into this world has control of their own starting point. I was not chosen by God to grow up Jewish, or to grow up in the 1800s. If we can agree on this concept, we can also move forward to realize all that we have been given comes from our heavenly Father. My life would most certainly be different if my starting point was a different one.

The universal starting point for each one of us is to embrace where we began and share what we have with the same sense of compassion we've received from our Heavenly Father. This is our sacred duty. Violence is not compassion. Crime is not compassion. The language of hate and fear is not compassion. I feel blessed by the life the Lord has given me and the gift of my starting point. To those who have been given much, much is expected. I feel that weight every day. We each must acknowledge that all starting points are different. True understanding, compassion and forgiveness can be experienced when we recognize the sacredness found in ourselves and in everyone else.

Forgiveness is freely given to us. We never earned it. God looked with compassion on the world and sent us a Redeemer. May we find it in our dignity to be moved with compassion for one another. May we be moved with compassion because we realize the gift of our starting point, where and when we were born is as unique as our fingerprints. Differences occur, but it is how we walk with compassion to embrace those differences and not fear them that can lead to understanding and forgiveness. We never earned forgiveness, nor should we demand another earn it either.



Father John Ouper