

Church of the Good Shepherd and St. John the Evangelist

17 Pentecost
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Fr. Bill McGinty

“The McGuinness Inheritance”

On the 29th January 1927 Edward McGuinness stepped out of his house and slipped on an icy sidewalk. He hit his head and died instantly; he was thirty-nine years old. His wife Elizabeth was unable to cope alone with five children and she died herself within twelve months. Edward was a rich man, owned five businesses in the city of Cork in Ireland, including three jewelry shops and two off-course betting establishments. The young children should have been well provided for, but it didn't work out that way. Into their lives came their Aunt Martha. Martha arrived on the death of their mother, and took control of the family affairs. The oldest child, Clare was sixteen. Martha had her shipped and packed off to America where she was locked up in a convent in San Antonio. The four younger children were placed in an orphanage deep in the Irish countryside. The family businesses disappeared mysteriously, and all the money, the shops and home with it.

As the years rolled on, Martha's son James became fabulously rich and a very important person in horse-racing and Irish society. The children languished in the orphanage for years, till one dark night, when two of them escaped climbing through a window. They made their way cross-country to Galway in the West; where they sought out a distant relative and grew up working on his farm.

I tell you this story as it was told to me by my great friend Fr. Brendan McGuinness, because one of those two children was his father.

I tell it to you because the theme of all three readings today is “forgiveness.” We use the word all the time, but I think its difficulty only comes into focus when you have a real life situation to deal with.

Brendan had a similar problem when in the 1980's he began researching his family background. People didn't wish to talk about it. Brendan found himself getting angry at what had happened to his father and his father's siblings. Despite all his family's warnings he started to dig and the more he unearthed the angrier he became. Then came the day he walked into a Convent in San Antonio, Texas and saw the little old nun sitting in a wheelchair.

Jesus in the Gospel today has something specific to say about forgiveness. Forgiveness is so critically important to his teaching and to his ministry.

We tend to think of Jesus as the healer, but so many of the healing-miracle stories are prefaced by Jesus' statements about forgiveness. Jesus will say: “Your sins are forgiven” or “Go away and sin no more.” There is a gradual, dawning realization as you read the Gospels that Jesus is more interested in healing men's spirits than he is in healing bodies.

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There are in the Gospels, an enormous number of stories of Jesus dealing with “possessed people.” There is the demoniac in the Synagogue, the man “Legend” in the graveyard and many more. Sin and evil will take over in a person’s life when they are invited in. Jesus brings inner healing because he brings God’s forgiveness and casts out sin.

When Peter asks Jesus ‘how many times must he forgive an eviler doer,’ he is simply repeating one of the problems Moses had outlined in the law. What do you do with the repeat offender? What do you do with the habitual criminal?

It was a question that continued to perplex the early church. Christ’s coming, his death on the cross and his Resurrection, has brought salvation. St Paul spells out that salvation as forgiveness for our sins. The early Christians wanted to know what to do about Christians who lapsed back to their former ways. Today’s Gospel attempts to answer that question. Jesus instructs his disciples by teaching them using a parable. “Those who are themselves forgiven must forgive in return.”

Jesus in his ministry seeks out people who not only need healing, but also need forgiveness. There is something to understand here. Sin brings fragmentation, both in our relationships with each other and in our relationship with God. Forgiveness brings wholeness. Forgiveness adds to our personhood. Prisons, punishment, concentration camps all do the same thing. They take away a man’s personhood. Without it we lose our identity and with it respect, dignity and what it means to be truly human.

Forgiveness, real forgiveness, hands us back our personhood. We find the acceptance and love we had lost. This goes equally for the person doing the forgiving in many cases. We are able “to let go” of anger, revenge and being a victim, with a genuine grievance. Jesus does not say that forgiveness is easy, just that it is necessary.

There is not too much forgiveness in the Jewish Old Testament. God punishes Caine for killing his brother Abel. Lot’s wife disobeys God, and is turned into a Pillar of Salt. Joseph’s brothers sell him into slavery. Judith slices off the head of the enemy’s General with a sword. It is the morality of an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.

Jesus brings a new teaching. It is diametrically opposed to the Philosophy of Rome. It finds strength in weakness. It seeks reconciliation and peace. For the first 300 years of Christianity the Romans did not, and could not understand this concept.

It is only in recent decades that we have failed to understand it ourselves. Forgiveness invites us to unite with Christ in his act of salvation. In earlier centuries Christians knew this. It is why they observed Friday as a day of repentance. It is why they celebrated Advent and Lent as a time of austerity. They wanted to remind themselves on a daily basis, that Jesus’ salvation did not come cheap, nor is it unconditional.

Our salvation and our forgiveness are conditional on our forgiving others and making forgiving a part of our being. That is not easy to do, 9/11 taught us that.

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On a hot day in July 1988, Fr Brendan had traveled south from San Francisco to San Antonio, Texas. There on a beautiful patio garden in the Convent, he met Sister Clare, his Aunt after all those years. Over a period of hours she told him the story of her childhood; how her aunt had stolen the family inheritance and left her siblings destitute.

“Do not be angry Brendan,” Clare said to him. “Martha inadvertently gave me a treasure greater than any McGuinness inheritance. I have had a life of music and art; teaching and children. Here among my little Indian and Mexican friends, I have had a life of love, service and prayer. God has blessed me with great happiness. I forgave Martha a long time ago. Today I pass that forgiveness on to you, that the anger you feel may turn to love.”

Brendan returned home a changed man, seeing not misfortune in his family history, but God’s plan and his ways. In a strange sort of way, he realized that his life, his work, had been born all those years ago when his grandparents died so tragically in Cork. And he knew that he would never want to change one day in his life as a priest. This was his “McGuinness inheritance”, and it was something to treasure.

As Christians we are in the forgiveness business not just because we wish to mend the past; but because we wish to build the future. The Gospel today invites you to take all your hurt, wounds, scars, bad memories and drop them into a laundry bag. Whether it is divorce, law suits, road injury or what your sixth grade teacher did to you with a cruel cane, this Gospel tells us, tie up your hurt in a bag and Christ will drop it into the deepest ocean. But more, he will replace that hurt with love; he will take your “Forgiving Spirit” and bless your life one hundred fold. This he has promised. For this he died, that you might live and live more fully.

Amen+

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