

Homily for the 6th Sunday in Ordinary Time

I'd like to tell you the true story of a girl named Dorie, who I read about in a book entitled *Self-Worth* by June Hunt. And by Dorie, I'm not referring to the fish from *Finding Nemo*. Dorie had a sister named Marie, and their mother loved Marie, but treated Dorie as inferior. At night, their mother would tuck Marie into bed saying, "Marie is a pretty girl – she's not like Dorie". And then after tenderly kissing Marie, she would callously walk past Dorie. Eventually, due to horrible circumstances, both children were abandoned by their mother at an orphanage, where they were raised, suffering unjustified beatings. Their mother promised to visit them, which she did twice over 7 years. Once, when her mother came to visit, Dorie went running over to her, calling, "Mother! Mother!" In her exhilaration, Dorie had forgotten she was to call her mother "Laura," never "Mother." As a result, this "Laura" pushed Dorie aside only to greet her sister with both a hug and a gift.

Dorie's father treated her no better, and in some ways, worse. She only met him after she became a young adult. When she met him, she hoped for the relationship with him that she longed for, and she shared with him her heart's aspirations to become a missionary. Looking for his support, she instead heard, "if that's what you plan to do, then don't unpack your suitcase. From this moment on, you're not my daughter! I never want to see you again!"

Then, one day at the orphanage, a group of college students came to speak to the children about God and His perfect love. But Dorie decided that what she heard couldn't possibly be true! God didn't love her. God couldn't love her. Nobody loved her! But as the students prepared to leave, one of them turned around and spoke slowly with such sincerity, saying to Dorie, "Even if you forget everything we've told you, remember – God loves you." Though words couldn't explain it, she simply knew it was true, and she spoke directly to God: "They said you love me. Nobody else does. So, if you want me, you can have me!" That very instant an unexpected peace settled over her. She knew this must be God. She grabbed hold of that love and held on to God – and He never let her go.

By the world's standards, Dorie had every right to hate her mother and father and harbor feelings of bitter unforgiveness. In fact, when her mother was charged with child neglect, Dorie had to appear in court. The judge asked her mother if Dorie was her child. After an agonizingly long pause, she answered, "Yes, but I'd have gotten rid of her before she was born if I could have!" But, as Dorie later walked home alone, she prayed aloud that God would help her to understand why her mother had abandoned her, and she prayed that she wouldn't hate her mother. Dorie said, "In that moment God let me forgive her. I felt sorry for her. I had no hatred. That day God performed a healing work in my life and prevented a permanent scar."

So, did God really expect Dorie to forgive her mother, her father, and all those who mercilessly used and abused her? Such a thing would be humanly impossible. Why would she even want to forgive the evil done to her? How could she ever forgive it? And why should she forgive it? But, Dorie knew that in order to put the pieces of her broken life back together, it was necessary for her to forgive those who had so wronged her.

My brothers and sisters, this is God's wisdom, as opposed to the wisdom of this world, as St. Paul speaks about in our second reading today. And in the Gospel, Jesus speaks eternal truth about those we are angry with: "If you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Settle with your opponent quickly while on the way to court. Otherwise your opponent will hand you over to the judge, and the judge will hand you over to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. Amen, I say to you, you will not be released until you have paid the last penny."

Forgiveness. Forgiveness is not about somehow circumventing God's justice. It's not letting the guilty off the hook. It's not excusing sinful behavior. It's not pushing your anger down. It's not about being a doormat. And ultimately forgiveness is not a mere feeling, because if we wait until we feel like forgiving, we may never get there.

But if we don't forgive, then, as Jesus says, we will be thrown into the prison of hatred, resentment, and torment, which ultimately we can never be fully free of until the "last penny" is paid to let us go free. Jesus has already paid that "last penny". Jesus has paid the entire debt of our sins. He has freely offered us the very forgiveness of God. And He invites us to "forgive those who trespass against us."

In truth, forgiveness is an act of the will – a choice we make not to hold the past against the person anymore – not because they deserve it – but because if we don't, then we're the ones mercilessly trapped and bound in the prison of the past, letting those old wounds fester and embitter us. Forgiveness is about dismissing the "debt" owed to you – releasing the offender from the obligation to repay you. It's giving up the option of holding on to the offense, and instead giving it to God. Forgiveness is possible even if it's never earned or requested – it doesn't have to be a two-way street. And, in the end, forgiveness involves changing your thinking about the offender, seeing him or her as someone in need of forgiveness, just like you and I are.

Is forgiveness easy? Often times, no. But, it's something that each one of us must grapple with all too frequently in our lives. Whether its wounds from childhood, or something that just happened last week, forgiveness is the only way to the abiding peace God alone can give us. God will give us the grace to do this, He just needs us to clear away the wreckage of the past first. God bless you.