

Third Sunday of the Season of Creation

September 17, 2023

Sister Mary Jane Vigil, OSB shares a reflection on the scripture readings: Sirach 27:30 – 28:7; Romans 14:7-9; Matthew 18:21-35

How have we experienced God's patience and forgiveness for the ways we receive, live in, and treat God's gifts of each other, of Earth, of creation? As individuals? As a community?

St. Paul's letter to the Romans, in its fuller context serves to encourage Christians not to judge one another. Each one lives or dies for Christ and "each of us shall give and account to God." (Romans 14:12)

St. Matthew's Gospel answers two questions: How often must we forgive someone who seeks forgiveness? And what will happen if we don't forgive each other? Jesus could not be clearer. We must forgive not 7 times but 77 times – a metaphor in his time and culture for a number without limit. Every time we are asked for forgiveness sincerely, we must give it from our hearts. If we do not forgive each other when we have been forgiven so much by God, we will lose God's forgiveness.

How have we been forgiven in our individual journeys thus far? In our community life? For what are we still in need of forgiveness?

To recognize how precious God's forgiveness is for the misuse of the gifts of creation, we need to be conscious of how precious and sacred those gifts are. How has God patiently increased our awareness of the preciousness of the gifts of creation? Of land and water, clean air, and life, all of creation. How can we contemplate God's presence in these gifts? How can we grow in discerning God's Self – gift in and through them? We have experienced God's patience, mercy, and call to conversion in our lives – a conversion to Gospel nonviolence and to what Pope Francis has called an integral ecological conversion.

The mission of relaying God's call to integral ecological conversion in these times can lead to frustration and anger when people refuse to listen, deny the truth and evidence, resist acting, and even actively oppose the work of caring for and healing the Earth and all its Web of Life out of greed for wealth and power.

When crises are urgent and as destructive as the ecological/climate crises today, it is hard to be patient and gentle with those causing them who do not see the truth

and the need or are not willing to change. When we watch families starve, the Amazon burn, floods ravage, Arctic regions melt, nations wage wars, and crucial waters evaporate in rising heat, anger about the thoughtlessness and destruction seems just and called for. When people suffer from the changing climate or various forms of environmental racism and injustice, the desire to strike out against those responsible rises quickly. The human costs to those alive now and to future generations can be devastating. Still, Sirach warns that clinging to anger and vengeance will bring God's anger and vengeance upon us. We must forgive others' injustice if we hope to have God forgive our own.

Legitimate righteous anger, on the other hand, can provide energy and courage to speak out and work for change, but this kind of anger seeks understanding, conversion, and reconciliation, not vengeance or destruction. It does not become bitter.

Psalm 103 celebrates God's forgiveness, mercy, patience, and compassion for us. As we pray this psalm in the context of the Season of Creation, the Holy Spirit is working with us to deepen our felt gratitude for countless gifts of creation and for God's mercy and forgiveness for the abuse of those gifts. The Spirit longs to heal us and rescue our lives from the destruction threatening us all.

As we nurture a spirituality of nonviolence, the frustration and fear for the future that we feel can move us to join and strengthen nonviolent movements for the societal transformation essential to creation care. Acknowledging our failures, slowness to change and asking forgiveness, we need to contemplate and give profound thanks to God for this patience, gentleness in forgiving us, teaching, and drawing us to work for the new creation.