

**Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle A**  
**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – September 17, 2017**  
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I was blessing a playground. I was excited about it because it is not exactly something I do every day. The Church of the Incarnation in Collierville opened an elementary school in the fall of 2000. We had a gymnasium and plenty of grounds for the kids to play ball or run around on, but no playground equipment. So for a full year, parents and students devoted their fundraising efforts to stocking a new library, to purchasing computers, and to putting in playground equipment. Finally, after landscapers and manufacturers had worked and city and county inspectors had inspected, our playground was ready for use. We decided to bless the equipment first thing in the morning before it got to be too hot. Parents, teachers, and students gathered on that bright Tuesday morning. We had balloons and photographers and holy water. We prayed that the children who played there would be safe and secure and come to understand recreation as a gift from a loving God. It was a glorious day and it seemed as though nothing could dim the smiles and the enthusiasm of the students. We knew that we were in God's presence. But that day which we saw as such a promising beginning for those children was in many ways the end of an era. You see, that bright Tuesday morning was September 11, 2001.

As soon as we returned to our respective offices and classrooms, we learned, of course, that while we were blessing a playground the world around us had changed. Television repeated the horrific images every two minutes, it seemed, and they kept getting worse. Planes crashing, buildings burning and collapsing, people running for their lives. Even now, sixteen years later, the images are painful. We saw them again this past week, interspersed with images of hurricane damage and relief efforts. I remember the emotions of that day in 2001 – shock, sadness, anger, grief. Oh, the passage of time has diminished much of the pain, but the wound is still there – the heartache for all of those families left behind, the sadness for our nation with its new sense of vulnerability. We've lived with this sadness, this vulnerability for the past sixteen years – a wound that still aches, a wound not yet fully healed, a wound that has been touched and reopened countless times since following repeated terrorist attacks.

In many ways, today's readings are shocking. In our first reading, Sirach says that "wrath and anger are hateful things, yet the sinner hugs them tight." Yes, we find ourselves saying, terrorists hug anger tight. They take out their wrath on innocent people. But sixteen years after the dawn of the terrorist age, are we still angry? Of course, but we're entitled to be angry, we tell ourselves, look at the lives that were taken, the innocence we have lost. Yet read this passage from the book of Sirach more closely. The author doesn't say that wrath and anger can be hateful things unless you are entitled to them. He says simply that they are hateful things,

and that it is the sinner who hugs them tight. The parable Jesus told in our gospel today makes the same point. Here was a servant who had no way of paying back his debt. He asked the master to be patient, promising that he would, in time, repay everything. For his part, Jesus tells us, the master was moved with compassion and forgave the entire debt. Unfortunately, the master's kindness didn't seem to penetrate the servant's heart. When faced with a similar situation, the forgiven servant could not summon compassion for the one who owed him money. He had been forgiven, the parable tells us, but he was unwilling to forgive.

Given the magnitude of the events over these past sixteen years, it is difficult for us to see the relevance of this parable. The master forgave a large debt, yet the servant was unwilling to forgive a much smaller one. That's not what happened here – we exclaim. This is no small debt. This is no mere unkind word or a bump or a bruise. Terrorism produced a real wound, deep, painful, a wound that is all too frequently reopened. The families affected feel it every day. In the way that our lives have been forever changed, we feel it every day. How can we be expected to forgive something that profound, something that painful? The answer, I suggest, can be found once again in that first reading from the book of Sirach. “Could anyone nourish anger against another,” the author writes, “and expect healing from the Lord?” Forgiveness and healing go hand in hand, Sirach is telling us. If we want to be healed, if we want the pain to subside and the wound to close, then we must begin the process by making a choice to forgive. We don't forgive because terrorists deserve it. We don't forgive because what they did wasn't all that bad. We forgive – or rather we begin the long process of forgiveness – because we are choosing healing over pain. We are turning our wrath and our anger, our desire for justice and our thirst for vengeance, over to the Lord. Jesus is the divine physician. He can heal any wound – but we have to be willing to let him. If we hold that wound tight, if we nourish the anger and the pain, then he cannot apply the healing balm of his grace, his mercy. But if we allow the Lord to touch our wound, if we – cautiously, at first – allow ourselves to be vulnerable before the Lord – then we open ourselves up to his compassion, his love, his healing grace.

That's true for these great national and international wounds – but it's also true for our own personal wounds – the times that we have been hurt by our spouse, by our parents and our children, by our friends and neighbors, and by our employers and co-workers. In each of these situations, we can continue to nurture grudges, to hug wrath and anger tight – or we can make a choice to be healed, a choice to forgive. Fortunately for us, God has already made the choice to forgive us. He loved us enough to send his only begotten Son to embrace our sin, our pain and to endure the agony of the cross. In the person of Jesus Christ, God offers us his mercy, his compassion, his forgiveness. Do we want to continue to live with our pain or can we make the choice to imitate Christ? Can we make the choice to forgive and be healed?