

Last month I was on vacation in Lake Chelan with five of my priest-brothers. We stayed in a house right on the lake where you can just walk right into the water from the lawn – very nice. Except that I usually don't go in the water much. As I've told you before, I don't know how to swim – sad but true. That limits my use of the lake.

But this time I did jump in the water one day and splash around. In fact, one of my friends said that I had a pretty good swim-stroke. That made me feel good – but it's true. I know how to move my arms and legs correctly. I've watched the Olympics. I look incredible – for about ten yards. The problem is really that I don't know how to breathe. I'm a good swimmer -- for the space of one breathe, and then I gasp and get water in my mouth and I have to put my foot down and stand up.

I want to talk about that idea of breathing – or not breathing -- in light of Jesus' words on forgiveness in the Gospel today. "Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive him? As many as

seven times?” “I say to you, not seven times but seventy-seven times,” . . . or else we’ll be handed over to the torturers like the hard-hearted servant in the parable.

Jesus seems very harsh here. Isn’t He supposed to be infinitely merciful and forgiving? Yes, but we can sometimes presume on God’s mercy, thinking that it doesn’t matter what we do, or how we sin – God’s forgiveness will reach us no matter what. But we should remember that every time we pray the Our Father we ask God to, “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” In His teaching today Jesus is telling us that there is a connection at work in our lives between forgiving others and being forgiven ourselves. They’re a package deal. They turn out to be two sides of the same coin.

The Anglican theologian and retired Bishop of Durham, N.T. Wright has used the image of human lungs and breathing to help us think about this relationship between forgiving others and receiving

God's forgiveness ourselves. A healthy person breathes in, and breathes out, naturally because holding our breath doesn't work for long. Think about my pathetic swimming technique. My legs and arms work fine – but I can't get my lungs to breath in and out naturally or calmly while swimming – and that means I'm very limited in the water.

Forgiveness works like the lungs of the soul. When we forgive there's an emptying and a giving up of ourselves. We exhale – and in doing so we allow space in ourselves to take in, inhale, God's grace and forgiveness in return, and so keep moving right along in the way to holiness and happiness. But when we withhold forgiveness from anyone we close up our souls. Something goes wrong. It's like we can't breathe spiritually. We don't exhale, so we can't inhale. We have to breath out forgiveness so that we can take in forgiveness ourselves.

I'm not talking here about wanting to forgive someone, but being unable to do so because of the depth of the hurt and trauma. If the desire to forgive is there, God can work with us. Not being able to

forgive in that way is still an obstacle that needs to be removed, but it's not as serious a block as a cold refusal to try to forgive. It's the difference between gasping for breath and holding one's breath. The one is hard and leads to an unpleasant life, but the other will kill us if it doesn't stop.

Have you ever seen a small child who gets so angry that he decides to hold his breath just to show you how angry he is? That's who we are when we refuse to even try to forgive. We're a little child holding our soul's breath. The only difference is that if his parent don't give in to his demands a little child eventually will give up and breath again. But, unfortunately, in the spiritual life it's for real, and for eternity. We're not on land like that childish child. We're swimming in deep water and we can't save ourselves, we can't put our foot down and stand up. If we stop breathing, refuse to forgive, hold our breath and try to swim it out anyway – we'll drown. And many of us are drowning in life.

Is that happening to us right now? Is there someone whom we refuse to forgive? Perhaps it's a child, a spouse, a parent – a friend or former friend. Maybe it's a boss at work or a fellow student – I don't know. But I do know that refusing to even try to forgive will ruin our interior peace, without which it's impossible to grow in prayer and closeness to God. And it will keep us from God's own forgiveness and mercy. It stops us up, and leads to greater and greater anger at God and other people, including people who haven't even hurt us. And all of this is going on inside us while we don't even realize that we're holding our breaths, hurting ourselves, not the others.

The way to exhale is to remember that Jesus taught us to pray for our enemies. Ask Him for help with that specific person. Pray for the ability, humility, and courage to try forgiving those who have hurt you. Just trying will make a difference. Breathe out, so you can take in a deep breath. Forgive, and receive life – or don't, and drown.