

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time – 2023 A

Picture the Tuesday after Easter, 1994. I lack even a vague memory of what I might have been doing. But half a world away that day, the plane of the president of Rwanda in south-central Africa was shot down over the capital city of Kigali. This assassination made small news blurbs in the U.S.; but the next day, Rwanda descended into a horrendous three-month genocide on the Tutsi and Twa peoples. No one knows the number for certain, but perhaps one million people were killed, many by their neighbors as well as the military. Such unbelievable turmoil shows that today's unrest in our country and elsewhere continues to visit the human family throughout history; and while the causes differ, our need for a Redeemer and Healer greater than ourselves is so clear. Whatever our struggles, we all face the challenge of finding inner peace and the strength to forgive amid the destruction of the world as we have known it, and God's mercy becomes our hope.

Some of you perhaps have heard Immaculay Ilibagiza speak, or read her books. Bear with me as I repeat a bit of her story. Born in 1972 in a small village in Rwanda, she lived a peaceful childhood with her loving parents and three brothers. She was 22 and home on Easter break when the genocide began. To protect his only daughter from rape and murder, Immaculée's father told her to run to a local pastor's house to hide. The pastor sheltered Immaculée and seven other women in a hidden 3 x 4 foot bathroom – smaller than the footprint of this table – for 91 days, huddled silently in fear as violence and murder raged outside that room and throughout the country.

Immaculée tells of having grabbed a Bible and a Rosary as she fled. She prayed that rosary – really prayed it, letting the words challenge and form her spirit – as a way of drowning out the fear and anger inside her, and the evil outside the house. She testifies that it was turning towards God and away from hate that saved her – not just her life, but her soul. After those 91 days, Immaculée emerged from that small bathroom weighing just 65 pounds. She learned that, except for one brother who was at school

outside Rwanda, her entire family had been brutally murdered. Later, she came face-to-face with the man who killed her mother and one of her brothers. Picture that scene, imagine those months of physical, mental and spiritual suffering. What would you say? It is the work of God's grace, as she is the first to profess, that she was able to say – and MEAN – the unthinkable, telling the man, “I forgive you.”

Jesus' words today, and in the Lord's Prayer, remind us of the centrality of forgiveness for His disciples. To forgive is not to condone or ignore harm or injustice, but it is the path to inner freedom. ***To live in bitterness and cultivate our grudges will usually fail to soften another's heart, but it will always harden ours.*** So to loose that anger, to let go of the animosity that binds us, frees us for a new life with God. 25 years ago, Immaculay experienced that healing power. Today, we can surrender anger, resentments, and grudges, even the real wounds we have suffered, in the same power of divine grace. It is good sometimes to ponder the sufferings that have taken place in the Body of Christ over history ... not to inflame our bitterness or solidify our divisions or confirm our pessimism, but to see how trivial many of our own resentments can be; to understand why we need God in our lives; and to marvel at how God's love proves to be stronger even than death.

Christ was there in that small room with Immaculee and her companions. As she put it, each of us has our own room like that: some place where fear and anger and voices of despair keep us captive. The same Christ is here in the Eucharist. He has not removed suffering from human history, but by His Cross He can still transform even our worst human moments into a triumph of grace. Today, I invite you to leave here the sorrows, bitterness, and losses that weigh on your spirit. Let Jesus change suffering to mercy, despair to hope, death to life. ***Immaculee was clear and insistent: even it is hard to believe God can save you, keep trying and never give up ... for Jesus our Redeemer, is here, in our midst.***