

Sisters and brothers in Christ, fellow sinners all, we gather together again on this glorious day to celebrate the only thing that really matters, that God is deeply in love with us!

On this weekend, ending the week in which we commemorated the 16th anniversary of the September 11 attacks, we encounter what's probably the most difficult, the most challenging request of us from Jesus. All four scriptures, treat the topic of FORGIVENESS and COMPASSION.

The Psalm response for today reminds us of the primary characteristic which our Jewish ancestors attributed to God:

[Sing:] Loving and forgiving . . .

Each time we gather together for Mass, for Morning or Evening Prayer, we pray the words Jesus taught his disciples and us, “. . . forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” A more exact translation would render “debts” instead of “trespasses.” Do we realize the challenge to which we commit ourselves each time we say those words?

Today's parable in Matthew, a short comedy-drama in 3 acts, addresses this notion of debts, in response to Peter's question to Jesus. Chapter 18 in Matthew deals with relating to each other in the Christian community. Last week Jesus gives a process for dealing with someone who's sinned against us, prompting Peter to ask: “How many times?” We get our first wink of comedy with Peter's offer of 7 times. Since the rabbis of the time taught that, at a minimum, one must forgive up to 3 times, offering 7, a highly symbolic number we have to remember, Peter is expecting Jesus to say, “You know what Peter, that's a most generous number, well done!”

We know that's not what Jesus said. Instead, he offers seventy-seven times, also highly symbolic (other translations render this as seventy times seven). Matthew isn't suggesting a hard number here: 77 or 490 if you do the math. It's not meant to be taken literally. Instead, Jesus is stretching the boundaries of forgiveness to enormous, infinite proportions.

And here's where the truly comedic part of the gospel begins. A king calls in one of his employees, a fairly well to do tax farmer who's in trouble, debt-wise. The king has floated him a loan, but he's failed to collect enough to pay that loan, in fact he's found himself, laughably, owing a ridiculous amount, 10,000 talents. We have little concept of a talent, so here it is in modern day terms. Using a \$10/hour minimum wage, a day's wage would be \$80, the equivalent of a denarius. 6,000 days' wages amount to a talent, and that's \$480,000/talent. Owing 10,000 talents, the man's debt is 4 trillion, 8 hundred billion, in today's terms. Quoting a contemporary source, it was a debt “the likes of which had never been seen.”

This amount alone would have brought a smile to the faces of the hearers, because it's so outrageous. How could somebody be that far in debt?

The next line, however, would have brought laughter to the audience: the employee asks, begs for more time, in order to pay it all back. Yeah, right. It would take 164,000 years of labor to pay it back. But the next line would have silenced the audience: the king forgives the debt, wipes the slate clean. The audience would expect the king to sell the man and his family in order to obtain some satisfaction, in their culture, reclaim his honor, because he had been shamed by his employee's mismanagement. What they get is totally unexpected, equally outrageous as the debt itself.

In the second act, expecting that because his debt was forgiven, he would be lenient with one of his co-workers who owed him the difficult, but payable amount of about \$7000 in today's terms, they're shocked that he has his co-worker thrown into jail.

The third act brings the employee back to the king, because he's been reported by other co-workers. The king reinstates the debt, and sends the employee off to the torturers. The key line on the lips of the king is: "Should you not have had pity on your fellow servant, as I had pity on you?"

Now, Jesus is using the parable to offer up what life in the kingdom is supposed to be. We have to be careful not to equate the king to God, because some behaviors described here are very God-like. Jesus knows how humans behave. He knows that we do not easily forgive the weakness and failures of others. And he has seen the consequences of letting our hearts become hardened in unforgiveness . . . it leads to revenge and sets in motion cycles of unending violence.

You and I have the power to release God's mercy, God's compassion, God's forgiveness into the world? We do this when **we** forgive from the heart. It's something only we can do. God is dependent on us for this important task.

To be honest, it's easier and some believe more satisfying to behave like the servant in the second act, seizing, throttling, exacting revenge. It's definitely easier to engage in labeling, pigeon-holing, judging, stereotyping, outsidings, distancing ourselves from "them" and "those people."

The person who counts the number of times they will pardon another is not forgiving, but keeping score. It's easy to fall into the trap of becoming the accountants of others' failures (or what we perceive to be their failures), and then to become judges determining their punishment. This is not about forgiveness, it's about increasing retaliation and retribution. Retaliation is the way of the world, not the way of a disciple. We are not in a position to judge each other. Only God can do that. Holding others bound to their sin poisons our love. It does not draw us closer to Jesus. Those who do not forgive harbor bitterness, hatred, and resentment in the heart.

If we claim to be disciples, Matthew insists that there are ethical dimensions to discipleship. Forgiveness is freely given by God. That gift comes with a responsibility, which is: Go and do likewise! As disciples, we owe everything to God. If God were to

collect on our debt, who of us could pay it? That debt has been set aside, wiped clean, paid in full by Jesus. If we let God's mercy, God's forgiveness, transform our hearts, then we will act with the same kind of mercy and forgiveness toward others.

Jesus wants us to commit ourselves fully to forgiveness as **the only way** to releasing God's mercy into the world.

How? By realizing that we ourselves are always in need of God's mercy.

And, when we realize that God's mercy and forgiveness are freely given, we come to the knowledge that if we don't imitate God and give it away freely, always, we commit the unpardonable sin: refusing to be pardoned ourselves by God. That's the only limit to God's forgiveness, and we can only impose it on ourselves.