

+In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Amen+

Years ago an interviewer asked Pope John the XXIII, “How many people work in the Vatican?” With a slight pause he responded, “About half of them!” This week that is a good description of the internet at home. It has worked, with a gracious estimate, maybe half the time. I tried hour after to reconnect, unplug and restart, and reboot to no avail. I called the provider, who shall remain nameless, and said, “Something is wrong here”, and the rep told me, “Unplug and Re-boot.” “I already have”, and she asked, “How many times? I said, “7 x 70.” She didn’t get the reference!! Truth be told, we expect things to work or at least be fixed in a reasonable amount of time. For all our efforts there should be a ‘payoff equal to our efforts’, so we keep count. Enter today’s Gospel with the disciples asking about and tracking efforts at forgiving!!

It is doubtful that Jesus was into the mathematics of forgiveness. He was about enabling forgiveness and that is no easy process. This text reminds us that the life of faith is not always smooth—it includes lumps. CS Lewis, in seeing this reality, wrote about the distinction between forgiving and excusing. “If someone jostles me accidentally and I drop my books I excuse that it didn’t hurt me too much and was unintended. But if a person injures me or my family and the hurt will go on hurting for years, I can’t excuse it. I only have the option of forgiving or not forgiving.” Forgiving is much harder than excusing. We know that some parts of our faith are simply tough to practice because they are contrary to the ‘usual’; to doing what comes naturally.

St. Matthew does not record the reaction of Peter or the disciples to our Lord’s answer about forgiveness, but rather tells the parable of the unforgiving servant which punctuates Jesus’ teaching. However, one can imagine how this struck them. The offer to forgive 7 times must have seemed a good and gracious plenty, (after all scribal law only commanded 3 times!) and to be told that this is only the tip of the iceberg must have been stunning! By means of Peter’s question and the parable that follows, Jesus draws us into one of the most counterintuitive places in the Christian life. It is a place of risks (what if we forgive the person doesn’t care?) and steep odds (what do I give up when I turn loose of anger?). Jesus had moved beyond simple moral teaching to confronting a daily dilemma.

Life in community always brings with it the friction and clashes between persons and wills. And the challenge for everyone is how to approach these collisions. The disciples had certainly heard Jesus say that vengeance is not an acceptable response from those who live under the Kingdom and have themselves been forgiven. To hammer this point to the heart Jesus tells a parable in which a man owes 10, 000 talents to his master. Please realize the number is not just pulled out of thin air. This was the largest number used in accounting in the ancient world and is equivalent to the daily wage of 100,000,000 laborers, so the debt is unimaginable. In fact, this could not have been repaid despite all the pleading of this man. G. B Shaw’s once commented, “Forgiveness is a beggar’s refuge; a man must pay his own debts”. I would like to ask him what we do about those debts no one CAN repay! Where are the places, we can’t make it ‘right’?

The most shocking and surprising aspect of this entire text is not the 7 x 70, but that **the king (God) forgives the debt.** It is not amortized over a 30-year period like a loan. It is simply eliminated. How can that be? Who has the compassion or patience or charity of heart to do such a thing? Perhaps the God who takes on human form, lives among and shares life with His creation, and then watches as the creature

strikes out against the gift. Only then, instead of responding out of hostility or anger, He makes the ultimate sacrifice and grants life and hope instead of vengeance. This is intended to leave the disciples thunderstruck--**and us as well!!** If God gives us **so much** grace, what is it to be asked to forgive others whose debt to us cannot be nearly as great? The remainder of the parable, however, shows in stark reality how quickly we can be moved to forget God's love, and just as speedily to call others to a level under which we would faint. This is the tough aspect of living day to day in community; with others whom we sometimes *love* and sometimes *despise*. Forgiveness in theory is beautiful, but in the daily grind puts us to the test. Yet, this parable is indisputably clear; not to forgive others is not God's desire. We are called to do so even when we don't feel like it or when it offends our sense of what we deserve. Don't mistake this as a matter of quid pro quo, or I'll give you this if you do that. No, the depth of the threat at the end, that is that we will not receive forgiveness, is a warning about what happens when we do not forgive. These 2 men are cut off from one another and nothing good can now come of their relationship. If we fail to forgive others who have wronged us, then a blockade is erected that damages us both. Right this moment; in just our history as a people; this needs our deepest heeding and consideration.

I must confess this text causes me some degree of anxiety and pain, because I know how quickly I can respond to others in an ungracious way. I also know that there are times when I rather enjoy the feel of a good grudge!! However, I also know there are some debts I cannot repay and some debts I don't know how to forgive in myself. I am cast upon God's mercy to find wholeness.

Every Sunday we come here and pray both privately and in the confession that we "acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness". We state our realization that we deserve judgment, and we pledge our **intent**, through the grace we actually receive in the absolution, to live in a new way. We are saying that we stake our future living on God's grace. This parable supports that faithful response. It shows us that God's forgiveness does not stop the moment it is granted, nor is it an individualized gift, but is meant to take us and others to a new level of living. It has a purpose beyond us, and that is to create redeemed community.

One of the difficulties is that we tend to think of being forgiving as being soft or eliciting a state of emotion that we may not feel. Let's be clear about what forgiveness is not. It isn't lying down and getting run over by others, nor is it passivity or permissiveness by which people avoid accountability. Justice without mercy can become cruel, but forgiveness without accountability can become a cheap out. When folks come for confession and we talk about making restitution where possible, but more altering our life, on occasions people will say things like, "I thought this would just get rid of my guilt and be free", and that is true. Grace is freely given but it is not cheap; it cost God the crucifixion of his Son. The grace of forgiveness is **just the beginning of transformation** and forming a new life. The same Lord who told accusers who were without sin to cast the first stone also told the women to "Go and sin no more". Too much contemporary Christianity practices what Bonhoeffer called 'cheap grace'.

Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession...Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate."

I want to suggest to you that our participating in forgiving is not solely a matter of how you feel, what you are thinking at a moment, or even what your sense of justice is; rather a matter of **will** or Volition. It is something that through discipline and living in grace that we can learn to exercise. We don't talk about this much and that is not to our advantage. In the Our Father we pray our wills are taken into God's will, and we hear in the invitation to confess, "You that do truly and earnestly repent you of your sins, and

INTEND to lead a new life..." What does it mean to intend something? It is not merely wishful thinking, or a way of saying, "I hope I get around to it." It is instead a door through which we step, which requires personal discipline. It means that we unlearn our responses which often harm others and ourselves. It places on us who have been forgiven of the deepest debts we owe, the opportunity to witness to that gift, by turning from revenge. I have a friend whose favorite saying is, "Don't get mad; get even!!" I am pretty sure that is not what this parable suggests! Both St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas talk about how we become habituated to sin. It becomes so "normal" and regular that we are not shocked by it, and then we lose any sense of guilt. It is against that which we must contend.

How is that discipline of self possible? First, I think it calls for us to live with true honesty about ourselves and our motives. As a priest one of the things I am called to is to disillusion you. No, not disappoint, although that will happen, but to challenge your illusions. To see ourselves as we really are, both broken and in sin, is not to be avoided. As St. Augustine asks in his homily on this text, "Is there anyone who is not in debt to God"? If we pretend those states are not part of our lives, then we will easily fall prey to self-righteousness and judgmental attitudes. All of us must have someone who tells us truthfully where we are in our journey. Direction allows for that gift to be ours.

Second, we are invited to live with the Sacraments. God does not expect us to sit and wait for an awareness of His Grace. Instead, he embodies it in actions and created matter; in water, wine and bread, oil of anointing, and yes even in reconciliation between 2 people. When we do take into ourselves the very Body and Blood of Christ, we are being joined with Him and given grace and strength to encounter ourselves and others with a new set of eyes—as a person forgiven. These resources for our life together are vital. In Baptism we become part of a community that is more than what comprises human society. It is a community committed to a new and different way of settling differences, for we are the Body of Christ.

One closing comment; if we can become habituated to the state of sin, we can also build new patterns of life nourished by grace. We can attempt forgiveness of our enemies, when all else seems more reasonable. And in those attempts we can come to rejoice that there is another way to be in this world. Rather than held in bondage by anger or hatred, we can turn loose of those and allow Him who is Grace itself to take hold of us. This parable can be threatening, of that there is no doubt. But listen carefully to the core, the center, "The Lord of that servant was moved with compassion, and loosed him, and forgave him the debt." There is where we need to live. Amen+