

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως: Proper 19-A (13 September 2020)

St. Thomas', Glassboro

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Collect

O God, because without you we are not able to please you, mercifully grant that your Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Exodus 14:19-31, Psalm 114, Romans 14:1-12, Matthew 18:21-35

1 Peter's Inquiry

In our Gospel reading today, Peter asks a perfectly valid question. It's the kind of question I ask all the time. It's a recognition of what I'm being taught, what I'm being asked to do, and a request for clarification so that I can fulfill that request conscientiously and completely.

Peter asks, "If another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?" Peter knows he should forgive. But Peter knows forgiving is hard. So Peter wants to put some parameters around this thing, make sure it's something he can live up to and achieve. Or, you might say, Peter is trying to limit his exposure to the risks of forgiveness. After all, you can't just go on forgiving forever! Can you?

2 A Parable

Jesus responds to Peter in the way that Jesus often does. He tells a story. And, as Jesus often does, he tells a funny story: a poignant story. He tells a crazy story that is laughable because it is too bizarre for anyone to mistake for an actual event. A king decides to settle accounts. One of his servants owes him 10,000 talents. I did the math: that's approximately \$5 billion. Billion with a "b" like boy. Or like billion. It's actually that much. This nation-state kind of debt, not a car loan or a mortgage. And how much did he end up paying the end? Not one dime. He was forgiven everything, assets intact.

Yet the borrower, himself freshly forgiven, literally leave the room and begins to choke another servant who owes him less than \$10,000: not even a rounding error on his own forgiven debt. There's something sociopathic going on here.

Now Peter may have felt wronged like the king. He wants a stop-loss clause in the command to forgive. He wants a limit to forgiveness. And Jesus' answer is frustratingly clear: the example of the King is to forgive everything.

3 Jesus' perspective

Now we, the readers of Matthew, know who Peter is. We know that Peter is the one who will deny Jesus three times the night before the crucifixion. We know that when Jesus could have used some support, Peter was willing to swear and curse and look after his own self. We know that Peter had to be invited back into relationship three times by the resurrected Jesus who asked him, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?"

Peter already owed a greater debt that he knew: and his debt was going to continue to grow. Jesus knew that. Yet the king had already decided to forgive an unimaginable debt for Peter. This is the standard, the example of forgiveness, which Peter was called to follow.

4 My perspective

This parable is not one that invites me to feel easy and content with my own spiritual maturity. This parable is not one that makes me feel good and proud of my own spiritual achievements. When Peter, the apostle, the great Saint, who had the benefit of Jesus' company and teaching in person for several years, is compared to someone who owes an unimaginable debt, where does that leave me?

It is a matter of psychological safety for me to carefully avoid noticing or thinking about the ways I have sinned against God, against other people, and especially against those whom I love the most. Thinking about such things would be just too hard. But it's not so difficult to think about those who have sinned against me, who have wronged me in some way or another. Dwelling on such things is much easier.

So Jesus' story offers me some perspective. Jesus offers me some encouragement to face up to the realities of my life, to see how the scales are truly balanced, and to make some choices about exactly how fastidious I want to be about demanding justice for myself.

5 God's POV

Peter wanted to limit forgiveness. He didn't realize how big his own need really was. But Jesus knew.

Jesus knew forgiveness is a serious business. Jesus knew that the forgiveness God offers is a forgiveness without limits. Jesus knew that God's forgiveness was of a magnitude that could only be expressed by crucifixion, God's utter giving of God's whole self for the welfare of largely unrepentant people. There is no limit to which God does not go in order to forgive.

And in the end, that's good news. Forgiveness isn't first of all a demand, as Peter perceived it. Forgiveness is first of all a gift. Jesus' knew that forgiveness can't be demanded. We are not first of all the givers of forgiveness but the recipients of it.

If forgiveness was the kind of thing you could count, if forgiveness had limits, you and I might have reason to worry. We might have reason to fear looking into the mirror and counting our failures. But Jesus used his own body to show that God would stop at nothing to reach us, that God's store of grace is beyond counting.

Jesus told Peter a parable that carried a big challenge. But only because it made an even bigger promise. Jesus promised that you and I can know for sure that we are never beyond the reach of God's grace, God's forgiveness.

And it is only and always on that basis, on the fact that we have been forgiven much, that we are invited to free ourselves by forgiving others.

Amen.