

24A SML 2020  
MT 18:21-35

“You can never give what you don’t have.” This truism applies to anything that we would attempt to give, even mercy. To give or show mercy requires that we, somewhere along the line, have received mercy. To be merciful requires that we be full of mercy, and the only way to be full of mercy is to receive and be filled with mercy. Mercy is not something that we can conjure up on our own, or grit our teeth and bring into reality by force of will. A mercy that forgives all injuries – that forgives, “all injuries,” is beyond our human capacity and requires nothing short of God’s merciful grace, God’s superhuman help to be merciful.

God’s mercy is scandalous. It is outrageous, it is transformative, and it differs greatly from excusing. Some offenses are excusable. Many are not. That’s where mercy comes in. Mercy is required when we are faced with the inexcusable and tempted to declare those offenses unforgivable.

God’s mercy is scandalous because it offends our innate sense of human justice. Quite simply, God’s mercy is not fair. I think of the Parable of the Prodigal Son and the older brother

who quite justly protested the lavishness with which his father welcomes the younger brother home. The text is quite clear the younger brother was not motivated by a perfect contrition. He's not motivated by repentance for his selfish rebellion and rejection of his faith, his family and his culture. He was motivated by self-interest. His was a very imperfect act of contrition, as he realized he would be better taken care of as a servant in his father's house than eating the slop of pigs. And yet, his carefully rehearsed apology is:

- ✓ smothered by the loving arms of the father,
- ✓ his many sins are forgiven,
- ✓ and he is welcomed home into the family.

That his injuries should be so easily forgiven is unfair and scandalous, and yet it is with this unfair and scandalous mercy that we ourselves have been, or can be, forgiven.

This evening's/morning's gospel of the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant tell us God's mercy is outrageous. On a first reading of the parable, there is the obvious point that forgiveness ought to breed forgiveness, but the story really highlights the outrageous nature of God's mercy, once you understand the amounts in question. In today's economy, the unforgiving servant was forgiven a debt "literally ten thousand

talents,” or \$6 Billion as compared to the debt of one hundred denarii, or \$12,000, that was owed him. Since none of us are fluent in ancient near-Eastern monetary systems, we completely miss the point that made Jesus’ listeners laugh out loud. The amount is absolutely ludicrous. And the unforgiving servant’s plea to be patient while he pays back \$6 Billion was nothing more than blowing smoke. He would never be able to pay off his debt in full. The point: God’s mercy is absolutely laugh-out-loud outrageous, and yet it is with God’s outrageous mercy that we have been, or can be, forgiven.

God’s mercy is transformative. Jesus told a similar parable to today’s gospel at the home of Simon the Pharisee. A woman, who was a sinner, a prostitute, has entered the house and washed Jesus’ feet with her tears and dries them with her hair. She then anoints them with oil. Jesus allows her to perform this scandalous gesture. Small alabaster jars were often worn around the necks of women who belonged to the oldest profession in the world, thus pointing to the reason why she had a reputation as a sinner. She wore her “scarlet P” around her neck. The oil, once used in her former “job,” is now used for a better purpose. Through this parable, Jesus teaches us about the transformative power of God’s mercy. The servant

who has been forgiven will love more. She is forgiven, not because she showed love. Her showing love reveals she has been forgiven. God's mercy is transformative.

The key to living out the spiritual work of mercy, "to forgive all injuries," is to ask God for mercy for our own sins and to experience His scandalous, unjust, lavish, outrageous and transformative mercy.

Clearly, you and I have received scandalous, outrageous and transformative mercy from God. As He has forgiven us, so we are commanded to forgive each other.

To act as if "it" (whatever "it" may be), never happened, or to act as if "it" never hurt, that would be absurd. Some of us have been truly hurt and deeply hurt by others. And likewise, some of us here have truly hurt and deeply hurt others.

To forgive someone doesn't mean to pretend that it didn't hurt, or to return to a state that they could hurt us again, especially if they don't understand how deeply they've hurt us in the first place. How many times have I heard, "Father, I've tried to explain this to them, and they just don't get it." Alright . . .

To forgive in those circumstances, can simply be boiled down to this. To say about the one who has deeply hurt me,

“He doesn’t owe me anything anymore, not even an apology. I don’t need an apology to forgive him. It would be nice, but I don’t need it.” Because this does not even require that they get it, or that you get the last word (which you won’t). It doesn’t even require that there be a confrontation. All it requires is you admitting to yourself that they don’t owe you anything. And the only way you’ll be able to say that, and mean it, is by grace.

And grace is what you and I are about to receive from this altar, the precious Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus, the new and eternal covenant, for the forgiveness of sins. That’s why we receive the Eucharist, for the forgiveness of sins. You do this, you forgive sins, when you remember Me, when you remember that I have forgiven your sins.

There are few things in life more difficult than forgiving someone who has really hurt us. And yet, God’s grace from the the Eucharist, the new and everlasting covenant, which gives us a new heart, is a grace that is able to forgive, and it is extremely freeing when we do.