

**A** sure way to damage any close relationship, perhaps irrevocably, is to tell the other, "You owe me!" The dictionary defines "owe" as "to be under obligation to pay or repay in return for something received,"<sup>1</sup> and one often learns to one's misfortune that intimacy and obligation don't mix well. Trying to mix the two frames a relationship in contractual terms: "I did that for you, now you must do this for me."

This is entirely appropriate in some circumstances, of course. When I was in the corporate world, for example, the company would tell me, "This is what we want you to deliver for us a year or more from now," and, in turn, I would say, "This is what I want you to pay me for it." It was an entirely commercial transaction. Our relationship consisted solely of reaching an agreement whereby I would produce what the company wanted, and the company would pay me what I wanted to produce it. I didn't pledge to like them; they didn't pledge to like me. Straight-cash homies, the both of us. But it was a relationship that worked; it was functional.

Was it an intimate one, though? Not by a long shot. Intimacy is something else entirely. Intimate relationships are those wherein each individual freely says to the other, "I will give of myself to you" — without basing it on any particular "deliverable". Intimacy can't be bargained for. Confuse the two, the contractual and the intimate, and trouble ensues.

If this is true in our personal life, it's even more true in our spiritual one. Too often, we're tempted to bargain with God. "If you do something for me, I'll do something for you," or, "Now that I've done these good things, what can I expect of you, God? What will you do for me?"

It's not an unreasonable question, though: what *can* we expect of God? In the First Reading today, we heard God's covenant with Noah. "For all ages to come," God assures Noah, "I will recall the covenant I have made between me and you and all living beings, so that the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all mortal beings."<sup>2</sup> This is what we tend

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/owe>.

<sup>2</sup> Gen 9:12;15 (NAB).

to remember — God promises that He'll never again destroy the world and its creatures in anger and enters into a covenant, a sacred promise, to this effect.

We tend to forget, however, exactly *why* He sent the flood in the first place. The flood came, the Book of Genesis tells us, because "When the Lord saw how great was man's wickedness on earth and how no desire that his heart conceived was ever anything but evil, he regretted that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was grieved."<sup>3</sup> Judgment and retribution, in the form of the flood, resulted as a consequence of our "wickedness" and "evil". It was the cost of our sinfulness.

In His covenant with Noah, God vows that He'll never again impose such a terrible price for our misconduct. That doesn't mean that God was under any illusion that henceforth humankind would be any less wicked or evil, or that in the future He was less likely to be grieved by our misdeeds. The question, then, is: if sinfulness once resulted in destruction, but now it need not, what changed?

Each time we see a rainbow stretching from the heavens to the earth, we see the sign of God's covenant with Noah,<sup>4</sup> a sign that things *have* changed, and every time we see a crucifix and recall Christ's arms stretching from the earth to the heavens, we see the sign of the new and everlasting covenant, another, richer sign that things have indeed changed. What changed?

The promise of mercy and forgiveness, the promise that reaches its full fruition in Christ.

Christ; Christ changes everything.

God's mercy and forgiveness expressed in the redemption of the Cross changes everything.

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<sup>3</sup> Gen 6:5-6 (NAB).

<sup>4</sup> Gen 9:13 (NAB).

Christ's sacrifice of Himself for us, a sacrifice God ordains even in the time of Noah, changes everything.

What can we expect of God? We can expect more of what He has already given us: mercy and forgiveness. Like the father who never gives up looking for his prodigal son and who embraces him despite his failures,<sup>5</sup> God never tires of looking for us and welcoming us into His arms when we return. He does this not because of who or what we are; still less does He do it because we have somehow earned it. Instead, He does it because of who *He* is: love, mercy, forgiveness, reconciliation itself.<sup>6</sup>

This doesn't mean that the question of judgment is no longer pertinent. It's true, as Christ teaches us, that when we pass from this life each of us faces Him in a particular judgement in which we'll be separated "as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats," the former to enter "the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world,"<sup>7</sup> and the latter, well, they're headed for something else. But Christ doesn't *impose* this judgment, He doesn't *make* us sheep or goats; rather, He simply recognizes what we've made ourselves. Day by day, through our own choices, our own conduct, we make ourselves sheep or we make ourselves goats. We become the choices we make. Day by day, we compose a page of the judgment we'll eventually face.<sup>8</sup> And even in this life, we're free to make choices, but we're not free to choose the consequences of our choices, and sometimes God leaves us to the consequences we've chosen.

Even then, we trust in His mercy. To think that God simply bides His time waiting for the opportunity to condemn us is to misunderstand the nature of God. Goats though we may be,

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<sup>5</sup> Lk 15:20ff. (NAB).

<sup>6</sup> "In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us ...", 1 Jn 4:10 (NAB).

<sup>7</sup> Mt 25:32 (NAB).

<sup>8</sup> Mt 25:37-46 (NAB).

we trust in the mercy and forgiveness of God because that's who He is. Even goats may be redeemed if God wills it.

The real question, the question that gets to the heart of the Lenten season, is not what we can expect from God, but what God expects from us.

In the Gospel today we heard Jesus proclaim at the very outset of His earthly ministry, "Repent, and believe in the gospel."<sup>9</sup> In the New Testament, the Greek word translated as the English "repent" means to think differently, to act differently, to change fundamentally,<sup>10</sup> particularly with regard to the core message of the Gospel, forgiveness and reconciliation.

For many people, this is perhaps one of the most difficult aspects of discipleship. We may be able to grant, intellectually, dogmatically, that God is forgiving, but somehow we find it difficult to accept God's forgiveness and still more difficult, oftentimes, to forgive ourselves. We think of things we have done (or left undone) and think, "I don't deserve to be forgiven." That might, in fact, be true. But God doesn't forgive us because we deserve it or have somehow earned it. His forgiveness is *always* unmerited, for nothing we can ever do imposes any obligation on Him. He doesn't forgive us because of who *we* are but because of who *He* is. Part of repentance is learning to *accept* His forgiveness, and when we learn to accept His forgiveness, we're also beginning to learn how to forgive others. That, too, is part of repentance: learning to be forgiving, even though, like us, others don't deserve it.

This is such a difficult part of discipleship because forgiving others can be very challenging, all the more so if we're not really convinced of our own need for forgiveness — and not just from God, but from others, too. This is why the rote "apologies" we often hear are so laughable and pathetic. You know the kind: "If my words or actions offended (fill in the blank), I

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<sup>9</sup> Mk 1:15 (NAB).

<sup>10</sup> "Μετανοια". See James Strong, *A Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Greek New Testament and the Hebrew Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2009) 3340-3341.

apologize ...", which really means, "I don't regret any of the things I said or did and I acknowledge no responsibility for them, but if you were hurt by them, well tough ..."

Repentance involves a genuine awareness of our own need for forgiveness, which is to say, a genuine awareness of how what we say and do harms others, as well as a genuine sorrow for this.

Repentance also involves our willingness to *be* forgiving. Forgiving others doesn't mean that we accept the things that have been said or done to us or to others, or that they were or are somehow OK, only that we're making a conscious effort not to carry with us the burden of anger or resentment they've occasioned as if we're Marley's ghost dragging along our chains.

This is the heart of the Lenten journey. We seek forgiveness, and we try to become more forgiving. The traditional Lenten practices of prayer, fasting and almsgiving are simply tools for strengthening our relationship with God and with others. We pray so that we may know God more fully; we fast so that we may give up that which distances us from God in heaven and our brothers and sisters on earth, particularly our grievances and our recriminations (fasting from food is just a way of learning to refrain from the antagonisms we sometimes sup on); we give alms so that we may learn to give of ourselves and to remind ourselves of our own neediness. And make no mistake: all of us are needy, just in different ways.

Being honest enough to accept our own need for forgiveness; learning to accept forgiveness; learning to be forgiving; learning to love as Christ loves us — this is "repentance". This is "believing in the Gospel".

May this be our Lent and may this bring us into the new life of Easter, the new life of discipleship.