

24th Sunday of Ordinary Time

Peter approached Jesus and asked him,
“Lord, if my brother sins against me,
how often must I forgive?
As many as seven times?”
Jesus answered, “I say to you, not seven times but seventy-seven times.
That is why the kingdom of heaven may be likened to a king
who decided to settle accounts with his servants.
When he began the accounting,
a debtor was brought before him who owed him a huge amount.
Since he had no way of paying it back,
his master ordered him to be sold,
along with his wife, his children, and all his property,
in payment of the debt.
At that, the servant fell down, did him homage, and said,
‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back in full.’
Moved with compassion the master of that servant
let him go and forgave him the loan.
When that servant had left, he found one of his fellow servants
who owed him a much smaller amount.
He seized him and started to choke him, demanding,
‘Pay back what you owe.’
Falling to his knees, his fellow servant begged him,
‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.’
But he refused.
Instead, he had the fellow servant put in prison
until he paid back the debt.
Now when his fellow servants saw what had happened,
they were deeply disturbed, and went to their master
and reported the whole affair.
His master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant!
I forgave you your entire debt because you begged me to.
Should you not have had pity on your fellow servant,
as I had pity on you?’
Then in anger his master handed him over to the torturers
until he should pay back the whole debt.
So will my heavenly Father do to you,
unless each of you forgives your brother from your heart.”

Mt 18:21-35

How often must I forgive? As many as seven times? - “Not seven times but seventy-seven times.” In our modern way, we would probably say it differently: “Do I have to forgive a THOUSAND times?” - “Not a thousand but THOUSANDS OF THOUSANDS, MILLIONS OF MILLIONS. Every time!”

Jesus' answer comes with a story of the ungrateful debtor. The king is reconciling his books. The debtor is undergoing the soul-crushing procedure of comparing the sum of the debt with the possible value of his life. The accounting is brutal, since the servant owes much. Everything must go. Everything has to be monetized: the debtor himself, his wife, children, everything he owns. All his life must be expressed in a number to repay the debt or, if it's not enough, a different number that determines his time in prison.

Despite its brutality, there is nothing unusual about this process. It is as old as mankind. The numbers on both sides of the equation must agree. That's what we call justice, and that's what must be done.

The numbers must have been coming up short since we hear the voice of the debtor: "Be patient with me, and I will pay you back in full." These words come like thunder. Crushed by the shame of the debt and the brutality of the process, the debtor opens his whole life to the king and puts his very self in his hands. Completely and utterly destroyed, he can only manage a whisper: "Be patient with me."

The king forgives his debt. **THE KING FORGIVES HIS DEBT!!!**

Why would he do that? Maybe he couldn't take it anymore. Maybe this whole process of reducing man's life into a column of numbers was too much of a violation of reality. Maybe he wanted to protect his family, maybe he desired to defend the humanity of his debtor. By removing the burden of the debt, the king offered him back his whole life and a personal friendship to boot.

How else could we explain the sadness of the master when he learns that his former debtor has no compassion in his heart? How else could we understand the king's anger when he learns that his new friend is ready to imprison a man, just because he owes him some paltry sum? How else finally, would we explain the fact that the king humiliates himself by reminding the debtor of his forgiveness, as if he is trying to emphasize the depth of his disappointment?

The debtor refuses the king's friendship. He doesn't learn anything from the generous king. He wants his money back.

In the most cruel punishment, the almost-friend is sent back to the world of torturers and prisons, the world of debts and repayments, the world where persons are measured by the value of their debt.

Christ wants us to forgive always, seventy-seven times. In our Master's mind, mercy, forgiveness, is not something that I do. It is rather something that I am, an attitude of the heart, a way of seeing reality. His mercy reveals the face of God to me. In the eyes of my God, I realize my true value and the real value of everything I own. In the same merciful eyes, I learn to see the true value of those who are my debtors. The debt can never outweigh the person.

This is exactly God's way of being, of loving, of speaking, of thinking. He forgives all the debts so that the debtor is free to love, to live his life as it was given to him. God frees us so that we too can offer a gift of life. He throws Himself on the scales of justice to balance my debt.

When I don't do what God does, I reduce myself to my own pathetic logic of comparing debts, of monetization of everything that is mine. Every time I don't attempt to imitate God's mercy, I start converting myself, my loves, my talents, and everybody in my life into transactions that have no end and no final gain, that are sealed in my heart before they even actually happen. The only thing they achieve is to freeze my heart and distance me from everything that I am. When that happens, my whole life becomes a never-ending chase for revenge that I call justice.

That's why I want to be a debtor to my King - Jesus Christ. Unlike the greedy debtor from his story, I want to put in front of him all that I have, all that I am, and all that I will ever be. All my achievements and all my debts. With whatever is left of my humanity, with all truth and honesty that haven't died yet in my heart, I want to beg, "Be patient with me, Master." I don't want to say it as an empty formula hastily muttered by my lips or as a polite cliché dictated by fear. I want to say it as a confession of sins that entrusts everything into his friendship and is a response to the quiet voice of the Creator's mercy in the depth of my heart.