

21st Sunday after Pentecost- EF 2012
Matthew 18: 23-35
Dcn. Pat Hall

While at a retreat a few years ago, we had a guest speaker, Bud Welch. He said he was there to talk about his daughter. He was a proud Catholic dad. I remember him saying how caring and bright and accomplished she was. My memory blurs the details, but I remember that my dad-heart swelled with pride in sympathy with his. I did a little research to recover some of those details. I want to pass on Bud's pride in his daughter, Julie-Marie¹.

Julie-Marie had been born seven weeks premature and was given a 10% chance of survival. She not only survived, but thrived. In 7th grade, she was inspired by the example of a classmate from Mexico who was learning English. Julie-Marie went on to master Latin, German, Spanish and French at her Catholic high school and spent her junior year studying in Spain. She went on to study at Marquette University.

She went to work in August 1994 as an interpreter for the Social Security Administration in Oklahoma City. On a Wednesday the following April, while she was meeting a client in the waiting room, the bomb in the truck outside her building was detonated. She and 167 others died in that explosion at the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building.

It wasn't until that following Saturday that Bud received confirmation of his daughter's death.

Julie-Marie had been active in her parish, Our Lady of Carmel/St. Therese of the Little Flower. She ran a children's program and used her Spanish regularly in her service. She attended daily Mass. Bud would meet her at church and was continually moved when he saw how the kids ran to her calling out her name.

Once while they were listening to a news report about an execution, Bud said Julie-Marie remarked, "All they are doing is teaching children to hate."

Well, hate is exactly what Bud felt in the wake of his daughter's murder. It consumed him. His health suffered with smoking and drinking. His marriage deteriorated into divorce. He would have killed the murderer, Timothy McVeigh, with his own hands if he could have. He thought he could settle for a quick trial and hanging.

But yet he was moved with compassion when he saw Timothy McVeigh's father, Bill, on the TV screen. Can you imagine a parent's pain? Bill McVeigh had also raised his son as a Catholic. He had sent him to CCD. He worked the midnight shift so that he could be an active father during the daytime.

Bud came to the awareness that another death was not going to bring his daughter back. Bud reached out to Bill McVeigh. Bud went on record that he opposed the death sentence for Timothy. But vengeance is encoded into our civil law. Timothy was executed 6 years later on June 11.

Make no mistake about it. The Church condemns capital punishment along with its objections to abortion and euthanasia as it champions the dignity of life.

I don't remember much about the details as Bud described his initial meeting with Bill; I was crying too much and I wasn't the only one. I know it had to do with two men's broken hearts. I know it had to do with love. I know it had to do with hope. It had everything to do with forgiveness.

Bud will tell you that embracing forgiveness saved his own life, because he was headed towards a dark empty place. Bud will forever be my icon for today's parable.

Our unforgiving debtor in our parable is an example of how to court death, for surely an eternity of separation from the living God is what awaited him. It wasn't so much that God withdrew his earlier forgiveness as much as that, by refusing to forgive his fellow human being's debt, he incurred the same judgment for himself, for do we not pray:

Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. (Mt 6:12)

And also in the Gospel:

The measure he measures is measured unto him. (Mt 7:2)

We undeservedly receive God's mercy. We are empowered by the Spirit to share that mercy with our neighbor. When we refuse to share that mercy, we separate ourselves from the gift of mercy.

So how do we forgive? How do we forgive like our Heavenly Father, like Bud? It is beyond one's own human effort. We are able to do so only through divine effort that comes from God's gift of grace.

So how do we dispose ourselves to receive God's free gift of grace? Through humility, the humility we gain when we remember our own sins.

St. John Chrysostom stated:

[He who is] forgetful of the magnitude of his own debt...also forgets the compassion his lord had shown him. And through this forgetfulness of [the Lord's] compassion, he becomes cruel towards his own fellow-servant.ⁱⁱ

Our parable is an allegory. The king represents God, who shows great forgiveness to the servant for a huge debt, meaning a heinous crime. The forgiven one does not forgive his neighbor a small debt, the debt representing a slight offence.

The parable teaches us with extremes of irony. When we say we “get it” we still try to turn it inside-out for our own purposes and to our own detriment.

I’m sure that Bud Welch never killed anyone let alone the hundreds that were killed and injured by Timothy McVeigh. What minor forgiveness had Bud received that would compel him to forgive Timothy’s horrific act? Such is our inside-out rationalization. We resist forgiving those who have offended us greatly. We may glance at our own infractions, but yet still look down on those who do worse. We do so with pride, the arrogance that makes us think we are better, that we have the right to judge.

But we are not to compare ourselves to the standard of the worst reprobate. We are to compare ourselves to the man who was born of the Virgin Mary, the man who is true man and true God. It is only through his life, passion, death and resurrection that we could even dare to hope for God’s forgiveness.

It is Jesus’ bright light that illuminates the shadows of our sin. We begin the process of forgiveness by first embracing humility. With humility we acknowledge that we are hopelessly lost without Jesus, that we would be sentenced to living life aimlessly here and now without any hope for an eternity of bliss.

Through humility we discover the joy and gratitude that comes from God’s forgiveness. We are then able to open our hearts to share God’s mercy with those who have offended us. In doing so, we connect more deeply with God’s divine love. His love carries us to his loving presence, a presence that sustains us in this life, with a promise of life eternal.

Forgiveness of our neighbor opens our heart to God’s presence. He fills our hearts. May we discover God’s presence today, in his proclaimed Word, in our priest, in the faithful around us and in his Body and Blood.

God offers joy and hope, but also leaves us with a warning.

So also shall my heavenly Father do to you, if you forgive not every one his brother from your hearts.

ⁱ *St. Anthony Messenger*, April 2000

ⁱⁱ *The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers*, v. 4, p. 287