

Trinity 22

I take as my text today from the 18th Chapter of St. Matthew:

PETER said unto Jesus, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven.

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in Thy Sight, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.”

This Gospel passage from St. Matthew reminds me of an old saying, ***To err is human; to forgive, divine.***

Not many years ago, this saying would be frequently heard when people, as they're inclined to do, make mistakes here and there during the course of their lives.

I would dare say that we have each used this saying on occasion; but, how often have we really stopped to consider the full significance of those few words, and how they relate to us in our relationships with our fellow human beings and with God? ***To err is human; to forgive, divine.***

That we all make mistakes is, indeed, part of our human nature; that we find it difficult, all too often, to show forgiveness is also part of our human nature.

Yet, as Christians, that is exactly what we're supposed to do: to show forgiveness. It is a divine responsibility we inherited when we became ***Children of God*** through Baptism.

The Gospel passage from St. Matthew focuses our attention on this responsibility by recounting our Lord's parable of *Forgiveness and the Unmerciful Servant*.

A quick summary of the parable goes like this:

The king or master decides to call in a few debts.

A particular servant with a rather substantial debt is threatened with extreme measures if he doesn't pay.

The servant can't pay and asks for mercy.

The king takes pity on the man and forgives the debt, sets it aside, and the servant walks out free and clear.

But the servant is also owed a small debt by a fellow servant.

He calls in that debt, which the fellow servant also is unable to pay; but he doesn't stop there. He shows no mercy and has the fellow servant tossed into prison until the debt can be satisfied.

The king, upon hearing what has transpired between the two servants, calls in the first one and, after chastising him for the way he treated the other servant, takes the most extreme action he can against the servant for failing to meet his original debt.

While the Parable sounds like a simple story, it speaks directly to us. And, when we look more closely, we can find a much deeper meaning.

First, we find the parable to be a commentary, so to speak, on that familiar petition in the *Lord's Prayer* where we ask God to *forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us*.

The unmerciful servant begged forgiveness of himself but could not forgive others. He approached life within a frame of reference that was a double standard. He had one standard for himself, and another for his fellows. This double standard proved his undoing.

He never related the forgiveness he received with any obligation to be himself forgiving.

That, in itself, is a painful reflection on each individual, the double standard, exempting ourselves from the same rigorous requirements imposed on others.

Let's return to the very beginning of the Gospel passage when Peter asks our Lord, how many times should a person be forgiven. *Seven times?* he asks.

This topic was a favorite for discussion among rabbis, who were, for the most part, supportive of the Jewish tradition of three offenses being the limit.

Peter, apparently thinking he was being more than twice as considerate as the rabbis, proposed seven as a more appropriate number. But our Lord responds with seventy times seven.

Now, in the context of the teaching of our Lord, this translates into there must be no limit to human forgiveness as there is no limit to God's forgiveness.

What an awesome responsibility; a seemingly impossible requirement for us mere mortals!

Secondly, we find in this parable, on another level, a commentary on the *Kingdom of Heaven*. What it serves to illustrate is how God deals with Christians, not with the world.

We see through this story of the unmerciful servant that God has forgiven us the great and unpayable debt that we, as sinners, owe him. Thus, in consideration of this forgiveness of our inconceivable debt, we have a responsibility in turn to forgive the trifling debts of those who sin against us.

Through a closer examination of each element of the parable, we can gain a greater perspective of what Jesus is trying to teach us.

In this regard, the certain king, then, symbolizes God, and we are the servants; and the accounting is not the final reckoning, but more a summoning before God as David was summoned by the word of the prophet Nathan.

The huge sum owed by the unmerciful servant, the ten thousand talents, illustrates, by its enormity, the absolute impossibility of man making atonement for his own sin. We are in debt far beyond our means; we are mortgaged up to the hilt by our sins, thus only Christ could pay the price for our redemption and set us free.

Let's pause for a moment to put the two debts in a better perspective: 10,000 talents versus 100 pence. This would most probably be in silver coins, as gold coins were out of reach of most everyone except the wealthy. More commonly available were low value coins such as the *quadran* and *lepton* or *mite*, much like our pennies.

At that time, one talent would be equal to 6000 denarii or drachma, or pence. Moreover, one denari, or pence, would be the equivalent to a day's wage. The workday would be 12 hours, so based on today's minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour, that would amount to \$87 a day.

An annual wage in the time of Jesus would be 300 denarii — \$26, 100 — and one talent, or 6000 denarii would be wages for 20 years — \$522,000.

I think you can see where I am going with this — 10,000 talents would be the equivalent of more than 31 trillion dollars, according to the Roman calculations reflected in today's standards. Some scholars would call this the human estimate and that it relates to sin in human terms.

But, if we take the talent to mean a talent of gold, instead of silver, then we are talking about an astronomical sum — more zeros than I care to count — which would represent the divine estimate or *sin judged of in the presence of God, and secret sins in the light of His countenance.*

Compare this debt of the unmerciful servant with that of his fellow servant: in the Roman calculation, ten thousand talents compared to one hundred pence; more to the point, that 100 pence was only about three months wages, about \$8,700 compared to trillions.

The unmerciful servant, when called to account for his debt, is unable to pay; he pleads with the king for mercy, saying that he will pay all, an indication of superficial repentance that was proved in his later dealings with the fellow servant.

The king accepted the servant's plea for time and sets the debt aside, just as God accepts our imperfect repentance in our hope of better things to come, giving us more than we ask for.

Without a doubt, the king would have had the right to sell all the possessions of the servant, his wife and children as well, and have him imprisoned until payment could be made, rather extreme measures allowed under the Mosaic Law.

So, God has the right and the power to alienate Himself from us; the right and power to reject and to deliver into bondage all those who may have come up short of His expectation of us.

Now, the unmerciful servant, let off the hook by the king, proceeds to seek out a fellow servant who owes him a mere hundred pence, just a trifle in comparison. Without mercy, he demands payment, and, when it is not forthcoming, exacts the most extreme punishment, knowing that this servant would never be able to make restitution.

No love, no compassion. When the king is told, he recalls the unmerciful servant and imposes the most extreme punishment on him for his greed and lack of compassion.

As we look at this parable, we can easily understand what our Lord is teaching us about forgiveness: divine forgiveness and human forgiveness.

We have incurred debts during our lives for which we can never repay God, not in all eternity. But God in His loving kindness grants us full remission of our debt, full forgiveness of our sins. He made it all possible through Jesus Christ.

We are indeed bankrupt before God, just as the unmerciful servant before his king. We are nothing more than His bond-servants; and, even if we did have the wealth to offer, it would not be acceptable because salvation is *without money and without price*. It is through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ that God can abolish our debt and, through faith in Him Crucified, that we can be pardoned of our debt.

But least we forget, this parable also teaches us, as Christians, how we should forgive: seventy times seven in reflection of the pattern of divine forgiveness.

There is another aspect, too. Forgiveness on our part must be a constant attitude; not a question of celestial arithmetic, but rather our conduct, for divine forgiveness is unlimited and must be emulated.

What if God treated us as we treat others? We certainly would be turned over to the tormentor forthwith.

What desolation we would experience, if God forgave us sin for sin as we forgive those who wrong us.

In teaching us to pray, our Lord gave us the words, but it is up to us, with His help, to make those words our own.

As He said in the sixth chapter of Matthew, when discoursing on the Lord's Prayer:

For if you forgive others the wrongs they have done, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, then the wrongs you have done will not be forgiven by your Father.

God is always ready to give us more than we ask; always ready to forgive those who are repentant.

Thus, we will find that, if we are willing to open our hearts and emulate God in our behavior towards others, He will give us the grace, the strength through faith, through the power of his Divine Love, to have His disposition to forgive and, indeed, be forgiven.

We may very well ask if we are like the first servant, so engrossed in our own lives that we are not able to realize the true meaning of forgiveness; or, are we able to emulate the true, divine forgiveness of Jesus Christ?

God has given us an example for our lives in the life and death of his Son, Jesus Christ; he has empowered us through baptism and the Holy Spirit through the *Laying-On of Hands*; and he has sustained us through his *Heavenly Banquet*.

God has given us the gift of his Love, his Grace, and his Mercy.

Now it is up to us to reflect that Love, Grace, and Mercy in our own lives as we practice the Faith once delivered to us in love through Jesus Christ, to recall that old saying: *To err is human; to forgive, divine.*