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AMDG

Proper 19A - September 17, 2017

As I was reflecting on today's Gospel, I thought about the Lord's Prayer, in which we ask God to "forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive others who trespass against us." But, do we really want God to do that? Do we really want God to measure out the same level of forgiveness to us that we dole out to others!?! No, I don't think so. At least that's not my hope. If God forgave me my sins in the same way I forgave others, well, let's just say it wouldn't be very comfortable. Others offenses agst me pale...my very judgement n resentment ..is a n offenses... I think a better way for me to approach this part of the prayer is, "help me to accept your forgiveness; so I can be forgiving to others."

Today's Gospel is clear - clearer than most - God's forgiveness is unimaginably extravagant; and God expects us to be generously forgiving, as well. This level of mercy seems so improbable that most of us disregard it. The message that Jesus tried so hard to get across - "Be not afraid, you are God's beloved; now go forth and share that love" - this message is pushed aside by the view of God Jesus tried so hard to dispel "You are miserable sinners that do not deserve God's love, but he loves you anyway, so go out and try to earn that love."

With this misunderstanding we assume God is as judgmental and intolerant as we are, and so we are quick to judge others, and forgiving them is out of the question. We treat others with the harshness that we perceive God will treat us. It's a complete disconnect.

I think that's what happened with the first servant in today's parable. He literally couldn't believe his good fortune in having his huge debt forgiven by the king. And it was an enormous debt - one talent was roughly equivalent to fifteen years wages for an unskilled laborer, which means he was being forgiven an amount equal to 150,000 years of labor. It was an insane amount. Just to give it a bit of perspective - the median income in Nogales is about \$27,000. So, fifteen years of that income would be \$405,000. And, 10,000 times that is \$4.05 Billion.

That's the level of forgiveness that King showed to the first slave in this parable.

Ideally, the slave would have taken the king's generosity to heart, and would have responded by forgiving the slave who owed him money. A denarius in ancient times was equivalent to a day's wage. So, it was no small sum that the slave was owed - about a hundred days wages. Yet, having just been forgiven an unfathomable debt, the slave not only couldn't be extravagantly forgiving, he was the exact opposite, he was ruthless.

What happened here? The first slave didn't get it. His failure wasn't that he simply didn't forgive his comrade, but that he had just experienced an utterly unexpected, completely beyond-his-wildest-dreams]of grace and was absolutely untouched by it. And for this reason, he was devoid of any sense of gratitude. His whole life changed...and he didn't even notice. Complete disconnect - the slave was disconnected from the King's mercy and that disconnection continued in his dealing with others.

When we accept God's transformative love into our lives, when we fully realize that all our faults, all our perceived imperfections are forgiven - we are freed from the burden of our shame and guilt, and our response should be one of active gratitude - living out that same love in our own lives. Connected to God's lovingkindness we continue that connection with others in the world.

So, why is this so hard for us? I wish I knew. I wish I knew why we find it so hard to open ourselves to God's love and mercy. I wish I understood why it's so hard to let go of resentments and forgive.

Because we've all been there, haven't we!?! Stuck with a resentment so insidious, that we are literally tormented. I believe that's what Jesus was alluding to when he talked about the slave being handed over to be tortured.

There are a few pieces of hope I have to offer, based on today's parable and on my own experience.

First, we don't have to identify with the King in the story. Instead imagining ourselves forgiving an unforgivable debt, we can try and identify with the first slave, being the recipients of God's loving mercy and recognize that it's God's good pleasure to forgive those who seem

unforgivable, love those who feel unlovable, and make right those things that seem so wrong. When we realize that forgiveness is not primarily God's commandment but rather God's gift to us, we can allow that mercy to flow over us like a river, and then perhaps become more ready to extend that mercy and grace toward others.

The other piece of hope I can offer is based on my own experiences with resentments. Two practices that have helped relieve me of resentments and opened me up to God's grace and mercy. The first is the act of responsibility recognizing and accepting my part in a conflict. This is not easy. But, if I'm ready to be rid of a resentment and forgive, I'm ready to take an honest look at my own faults and failings. This is best done with a trusted friend or spiritual advisor. I'm not the best person to judge my own behavior. I'm either too hard on myself, or too quick to overlook glaring errors. I need someone to help me be honest.

And, I've learned by experience that I have to be ready for self-reflection in order for it to be of any use. Sometimes I'm so invested in a resentment, that there's no way I can look honestly at my part without continuing to obsess over the other person's part. The only thing I can do then is pray for the willingness to be willing. And trust that God will use even the smallest crack in my defenses to enter in and bless me with willingness to change. But, when I am ready, a rigorously honest examination of conscience can miraculously open me to God's mercy, and relieve me of an insidious resentment. Taking responsibility for one's own part in a resentment, and speaking it aloud to someone, results in a quick turnaround in one's life situation. Things which had seemed difficult are suddenly easy, an unrelated problem is resolved with ease. This is what happens when we clear away the detritus of our lives - it allows the Holy Spirit to come and bless us.

Another way of practicing forgiveness that has worked well for me over the years, is praying for the person I need to forgive. Even if I don't want to forgive them, but just want to be free of the burden of resentment, I pray daily for their well being. I pray that all the good things I want for myself and my loved ones, be given to them. When I've done this faithfully for two weeks, stubborn resentments have disappeared and forgiveness has taken their place.

Practicing forgiveness opens us to God's grace. As Richard Rohr has described, "Forgiveness reveals three goodnesses simultaneously. When we forgive, we choose the goodness of the other over their faults, we experience God's goodness flowing through ourselves, and we also experience our own capacity for goodness in a way that almost surprises us." But, that good can only flow when we are willing.

This is hard stuff. It's the very core of the God-life. This is not a "come to church, say your prayers, and be nice to everyone" religion. This is the Way of the Cross. Accepting God's forgiveness and responding by forgiving others takes desire, courage, and practice. But, most importantly it requires reliance on the Holy Spirit. And, the Spirit is always available to step in and help us when we're truly ready.

Today, I invite you to say the Confession, not after the Prayers, but after the sermon. Pray the words slowly, deliberately, confidently aiming for the knowledge that God already knows what you're confessing, and still loves you, and in fact, loving you was never in question. Try to feel the forgiveness that has always been there, ready to bless and heal you.

When the words of absolution come, try to feel it in your body, mercy flowing over you like a river. Then during the Prayers of the People, try to think of someone who you have had a hard time forgiving, and try and see them with the same forgiving eyes you saw forgiving you.

Let us confess our sins...