

Trinity XXII – 5 November 2023

“And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due unto him. So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses.”

+In the Name of the Father and of the Son...

Are you a moral person? “Of course,” you might answer. “What kind of a question is that, Father?” In our Ethics class in seminary, I remember studying that most people think that they are indeed moral individuals. What’s more, without hesitation they believe unequivocally that there should be laws and rules that must be obeyed... by other people! That’s right: we believe that others should obey the rules and regulations handed down from our various government agencies. Afterall, those directives are there for the good of the community. But naturally, if I personally choose to disobey one

of those same directives, naturally, almost by definition, I had a good reason! The most obvious examples come from our roads: speed limits are mere guides, completely optional, it would seem, on some highways. (Chicago, California; pick your culprits!) How about stop signs? My eyes are not as good as they once were, but it seems there must be some fine print on the stop signs in this neighborhood that they are optional if no one is coming, or at least if the driver can get through without running over the pedestrian. I know jay walking has been illegal in the past (my mother got a ticket for crossing a downtown street on a “Don’t walk” signal when she was a student at Portland State), but drive near there today and there are as many people walking against the signal as with it.

What about stealing? Surely taking a paperclip from the office does not count? Two paperclips? A fan? (It was hot in my apartment last night!)

My last example will show my age: when I was a child, when a friend got a new cassette tape, the rest of the crew would take turns borrowing it to copy it onto a blank tape. No copyright laws broken there! I do not know what the modern equivalent to that is, but I am sure it exists.

Enter our poor servant in this morning's Gospel reading: he must have been living high on the hog. He did not just have the Nordstrom card maxed out, but must have been vying for a segment on "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous"! Let's look at what he owed, as the descriptions are a little archaic: a talent here is not his ability to sing and dance, but a monetary unit worth about 20 years' wages for a laborer. As high as I think my student loan balances are, they are nowhere near 20 years salary. But wait: he does not owe one talent, but 10,000 talents! As my former students could tell you, Mr. Hart does not do math, but I came up with that totaling 200,000 years'

wages! Now, we know that sometimes figures are used in Scripture not literally but to make a point: did this man really owe 200,000 years wages? Perhaps not, but he owed more money than he could ever pay back even if there had been Powerball in first century Israel!

With that figure in mind, how much was he owed? 100 pence. Did they have pence in ancient Israel? Well, one penny was the equivalent of a day's wages. So, the fellow-servant owed 100 days' wages.

Nothing to sneeze at, but an amount that could conceivably be paid back. Now this whole scenario is almost laughable: take the morality out of it for a moment and look at the practical side: the first servant is going to use 100 days wages to pay off a debt of 200,000 years' wages! Perhaps an optimistic interpretation of the widow's mite...

Nevertheless, we are interested in the moral side of it more than the practical.

This whole story is an illustration of those familiar words from the Lord's Prayer: "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us". The first servant begs for forgiveness, and receives forgiveness of an extraordinarily large sum. (Notice, we have no reason to believe that he did not legitimately borrow this astronomical amount.) Yet, when his fellow-servant likewise begged for forgiveness, he would not even consider the request. He wanted one set of rules for himself, but a completely different set for others.

As if forgiving this mind-boggling sum is not enough, moving backward through our Gospel lesson, we began with Peter's question to Our Lord: how many times must I forgive my brother? We know there are "good" and "bad" numbers in the Bible: three and seven are good: Christ rose again on the third day, God rested on the seventh day, likely because it was the number of perfection. Six and 13 are not so good: 666 is the mark of the beast from the Revelation of St. John,

and Judas was the 13th person to sit at the table the night he betrayed Our Lord. A Jew was only expected to forgive someone three times, so Peter is more than doubling the required amount, plus choosing the number of perfection. How could one go wrong with that logic? In addition, uncharitably we might suggest that he is looking for an “atta boy” from Our Lord, or at least the other disciples: “Oh, Peter, you magnanimous soul, espousing forgiveness beyond what was normally expected!” But Our Lord knew Peter better than Peter knew himself, (As He does all of us!) and so He was not pulled into Peter’s little game. “Not seven times,” Jesus replied, “but 70 times seven”. Had Jesus been teaching a room full of middle schoolers, I can see them now doing the calculations in their head: “Cool – we only have to forgive 490 times.” Nice try. This “70 times seven” is no more exact than the 200,000 years’ wages. If our brother or sister in Christ is truly penitent, then we need to forgive him, just as Our Lord will

forgive us. I would lose count before I ever hit 490, but I know I have committed certain sins over seven times!

Now forgiveness does not require us to put ourselves in the same position of being taken advantage of. Common sense has to enter into the equation. As was pointed out to me this week by a neighbor, some people are in love with mischief. We usually cannot control the behavior of another person (remind me of that later: as of this past Friday, I am again the father of a teen-ager), but we can control our reaction to them. If we wish to receive grace, we must be willing to bestow that same grace upon others.

In Luke's version of this portion of the Gospel, the disciples ask Christ to increase their faith. They recognize what a difficult challenge has been placed before them. It is one thing not to resent a person, but another thing entirely to completely forgive someone who has wronged us. May we, like the disciples, recognize the significance

of this part of our Christian duty, and strive to forgive others so that we in turn might also find forgiveness.

+In the Name...