

Beloved brothers and sisters: Christ is in our midst!

‘Then came Peter to Jesus, and said, ‘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.’” (Matthew 18:21-22) It is this exchange between Peter and Jesus that prompts Jesus to make the comparison of the kingdom of heaven with a king and his servants. The number seven is significant in Sacred Scripture. It signifies perfection and completion as in the seven days of creation. As there was a seven-branched candelabrum in the Temple in Jerusalem, our temple also has a seven-branched candelabrum. So when Peter asks Jesus must he forgive seven times, Jesus tells him forgiveness far exceeds even seven times, but seventy times seven times. Forgiveness is to be an unending and always offered act of love.

Forgiveness and compassion is two-fold. First there is the compassion our Father in heaven shows to us. Then there is the compassion we show to each other, to every human person. Forgiveness has this two-sided nature because our sins have two components. When we sin, we sin against God, our Lord and King, and when we sin, we sin against each other.

This is where the beauty of today’s parable shines forth. The first servant is dealing with his king, what he owes his king, what he is indebted not to a fellow servant but to his lord and master. When he begs for mercy, his lord not only relents in punishing him but forgives the entire debt. The servant receives better than what he deserves because of his plea for mercy.

This then brings us to the matter of compassion between fellow servants. Having been forgiven an incomparable sum, we would think that the servant would be so lifted up, so relieved at escaping jail for him, his wife and his family that he would be floating on air. That he would show mercy on a mosquito that bit him. But he does not show mercy in return. Forgetting how greatly he has received, he refuses to freely give the same forgiveness to his fellow servant who owes him but a pittance compared to his debt to their common lord. And for his mercilessness, this wicked servant is cast into jail where he will remain, barren of mercy.

When we come before God in the sacrament of confession or pray the “Our Father” we ask for the forgiveness of our sins against our heavenly Father and against each other. Having received absolution of our sins, the wiping away of sins by God, we must offer that same forgiveness to one another. Not only when we feel like it, but when we don’t feel like it. It is not by our merit that we receive forgiveness. God forgives us not because we deserve it, but because we pray to Him for forgiveness. And because we promise to offer that same forgiveness to each other. We pray, “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” This is what happened to the wicked servant. Ultimately he was forgiven, that is to say not forgiven, in the same way he forgave his fellow servant: not at all.

Jesus ends the story by saying, “So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if you from your hearts do not forgive every one his brother their trespasses.” (Matthew 18:35) Jesus does not tell the apostles “your Father” but He says “My Father.” Even though He had already taught them the “Our Father.” Jesus is telling us that we can call God “Our Father” only so long as we are as forgiving of others as He is forgiving of us. If we forget God’s forgiveness and hold grudges against others then we cannot truly call God “Our Father” because a lack of compassion and mercy renders us unworthy to be called God’s children.

And for the person who has never asked our forgiveness, we pray for them and ask God to forgive them their sin. And if we cannot do even this, if we struggle to forgive someone, we pray to God to soften our hearts so that we may forgive even as He forgives us.

This parable today asks us to do two things: first, to remember our own sins and how God forgives us when we ask for forgiveness with a sincere and repentant heart. Second, this story reminds us not to bear a grudge against anyone who sins against us. If we do this, then we shall live in the fullness of life with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.