

Homily

24th Sunday in OT A 9.17.17

Father Todd Molinari

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today's Gospel and readings continue to build on our reflections and praxis of being disciples and how to live together in the Body of Christ, the Church. But the reality is that being a disciple living the faith in the Church is more about doing than it is about merely having head-knowledge. It's about putting into practice a way of life, that, while it is something that is taught us by Jesus, is meant to be expressed by how we treat each other. Faith is only faith when we put it into practice.

Today's Gospel builds on last Sunday: It is about forgiveness. "...how often must I forgive? As many as seven times?...I say to you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times..." The set up of the parable that illustrates this practice, as always, is more than meets the eye. It is about forgiveness, but it's also about receiving and giving of forgiveness; of "getting it" with regard to others being merciful to me; about reciprocity and correspondence of forgiveness; about human calculation versus the open-endedness of God's compassion; and it's about consequences of our actions.

The set up of the parable is pretty straightforward: A king is settling accounts with his servants and discovers that one of his servants owes him "a huge amount", literally the equivalent of the value of the assets of his entire kingdom. The king plans on having the servant pay down his debt by putting him on indentured servitude, which was a common practice in the ancient world. The servant pleads for patience in giving him time to pay it off - in other words, give him sufficient work-time to pay the debt, which is a plea for not giving into harshness - and the king, "moved with compassion", decides to forgive the entire debt and let him go back to work!

We know what happens next: The forgiven servant comes across a fellow servant who “owes him a much smaller amount”, that is, a fraction of a fraction of a penny. The forgiven servant “doesn’t get it” and treats his fellow with harshness, cruelty and holding him to the letter of the law according to justice. And upon discovery of this, the king makes the “wicked servant” pay the debt in the harshest terms allowed.

Jesus is first of all responding to Peter's question: The “seven times” was actually generous beyond the Rabbinic “three times” required for forgiveness. In other words, Peter is starting to “get” Jesus’ teachings and way of life and sees that being a disciple is about being generous with our compassion and willingness to forgive others. But Jesus answers, “seventy-seven times”, which means “without calculation or limit;” To be divine is to be boundless with one’s Mercy. And Jesus is saying that to be a disciple means that we can discover in each of us this unlimited capacity to be merciful to one another, and in doing so be “God-like” in our behavior.

But he also shows us that this is not a given. It is not automatic. It only comes to us to the extent that we allow God’s mercy to forgive us and transform us. And even when God forgives us we still may miss the point and continue to be unforgiving. The key is found within our relationships in the Church: The key is realizing that God’s boundless Mercy only comes to us within the community of disciples, and that when we "owe a debt" to one another, it is an opportunity to show compassion and to realize where we have already been shown compassion by God. As we go forward to receive the Body and Blood of the one who is Mercy Incarnate and go out to the week ahead, we are called to realize that being a disciple means being attentive to when God has forgiven me and when I can be God-like in forgiving others. But I also need to recognize that I have to do it, and that this is not automatic or something easy.