

Let us begin today with the parable in our gospel reading. In it, we are given an analogy of the mercy of God in Christ. Just as the Lord in the parable forgave the servant who could never, ever, repay the debt he owed, so too has God has forgiven us a debt that we could never repay. We should also note the motivation for this forgiveness. “The Lord was moved with compassion, and loosed (the servant), and forgave him the debt.”

Of course as the parable continues, we also read that this servant, who had been forgiven so much, was unwilling to forgive his fellow servant. He, who had received complete mercy, was unwilling to be merciful, and this ended very badly for him, and his family. Children of slaves are themselves slaves, suffering for the sinfulness and foolishness of their parents.

It is natural for us to focus upon the second exchange, between the two servants, the one who had been forgiven and the one who was unforgiven of the first servant. This passage, after all, is in answer to Peter’s question on how many times he must forgive a brother. This morning, however, let us instead focus upon the discourse between the Lord and the first servant. This interaction is the premise, the necessary context, for the parable. What does it mean that the Lord had compassion upon the servant that pleaded with Him for mercy? How should we understand this?

Psalm 86, which we also read this morning, puts a magnifying glass to this conversation. It helps us to more fully understand the goodness and lovingkindness of God. It helps us to feel with our hearts, just how merciful and loving God is towards us. Here are a few verses of that psalm.

2 Preserve thou my soul, for I am holy: * my God, save thy servant that putteth his trust in thee.

3 Be merciful unto me, O Lord; * for I will call daily upon thee.

4 Comfort the soul of thy servant; * for unto thee, O Lord, do I lift up my soul.

5 For thou, Lord, art good and gracious, * and of great mercy unto all them that call upon thee.

...

11 Teach me thy way, O Lord, and I will walk in thy truth: * O knit my heart unto thee, that I may fear thy Name.

12 I will thank thee, O Lord my God, with all my heart; * and will praise thy Name for evermore.

13 For great is thy mercy toward me; * and thou hast delivered my soul from the nethermost hell.

...

15 But thou, O Lord God, art full of compassion and mercy, * long-suffering, plenteous in goodness and truth.

16 O turn thee then unto me, and have mercy upon me; * give thy strength unto thy servant, and help the son of thine handmaid.

In the pleas of the psalmist, who we take to be David, we sense a desperation while at the same time an assurance of the goodness and compassion of God. The psalmist is in trouble and the path before him is unclear, yet he does not utterly despair. He turns to God who hears this prayer and will see him through the trials ahead. There is an honesty in this prayer, and David is facing circumstances beyond his control. When faced with similar situation, we also must turn to God; we throw ourselves upon His mercy, being assured of His goodness and His continuing presence with us through it all.

In this psalm and so many others, we comprehend that God loves what He has made. In fact, the act of creation is itself a covenantal establishment. There is an inherent responsibility of the Creator to the creature and vice versa. He made us human beings to be the pinnacle of

creation, but a creation nevertheless, and thus He will never abandon us. He loves us.

God's property is always to have mercy. We pray this each week, but I am not sure that its meaning actually sinks in to our souls. The word, "property" here doesn't refer to land, or to a possession that could be disposed. It refers to an immutable aspect of the being of God. Mercy isn't just an attitude that God has from time to time. It is an outworking of His very essence. Just as God is love, He is also mercy. Along with the psalmist and the servant that begs for mercy, we can always come to God, knowing that our cries for help and mercy will always, always, be answered.

Of course, a further implication here, is that we, being created in the image of God, are to respond likewise to those who come to us for help. We are to be merciful and graciously loving to each other as God is merciful and loving to us. This takes us past merely overlooking offenses that others have committed against us. It takes us past forgiveness. This means that we must actively seek good for each other. We are our brother's keeper.

Like so many other ideas, I suspect that the meaning of this imperative goes in one ear and out the other. First of all, the use of the word, "Imperative," is very intentional. We should not view taking care of each other, of loving each other, as something that is optional. We are commanded to love each other. We must do this, and if we don't, then we must question our own salvation. Perhaps that also is too strongly stated, but considering the gospel lesson, I don't think it is. We must move beyond our own self-centered perspective and become God-centered, which means others-centered. We must embrace becoming burdened with concern for each other. This is God's impulse towards us, and we are to image God to each other.

This level of concern is exactly what we see from St. Paul in our epistle reading this morning. Beginning with verse 3 of the 1st chapter of his Epistle to the Philippians, "I THANK my God

upon every remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making request with joy, for your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now.” First we note here that Paul remembers these believers. They are in his thoughts. As we go about our daily chores of living, how often do we think of our brothers and sisters here in our parish? If you are like me, this is not our natural disposition. I tend to focus primarily on the person or task right in front of me.

Second, we note that St. Paul is thankful to God for these believers, regularly mentioning them to God in his prayers. He prays for the Philippians, and his prayer gives him every confidence that these believers will indeed persevere in faith, and he says as much: “being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.”

Third, we note that this is not a one-way relationship. Paul is receiving encouragement from the Philippians. They evidently are lifting him up to God in their prayers, as well as likely providing material support to Paul through sending goods or funds while he is imprisoned. He states that he is grateful for their, “fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now,” and he also says, “both in my bonds, and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel, ye all are partakers of my grace.” These believers are undoubtedly partners in Paul’s mission, as they are also likely experiencing persecution for their faith.

And let us not think that this is just a business relationship. The Apostle has a true affection for these believers, of which he is not embarrassed to speak, stating “... it is meet for me to think this of you all, because I have you in my heart.” Then he says, “For God is my record, how greatly I long after you all in the tender mercies of Christ Jesus.” The affection and compassion that the Apostle has for these believers, that they are consistently in his thoughts and prayers, that they are held dearly in his heart, is truly moving. It is also challenging.

Should we not hold such affection for each other in our hearts too?

It is also instructive to note what the Apostle prays for the Philippians.

“ that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment; that ye may approve things that are excellent; that ye may be sincere and without offence till the day of Christ; being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God.”

So he first prays that they would truly love each other in knowledge and judgment. We can certainly understand this for it is easy to give someone a few dollars to soothe our conscience, but it is much more difficult to do something for another person that would actually help them. Sometimes not giving them money is a more loving thing to do. Usually we instead need to come alongside a brother, being inconvenienced and working beside them during difficulties. Love requires both willingness and wisdom.

The Apostle also prays that they would pursue excellence. This is one of my favorite themes in this epistle, and St. Paul comes back to it again in chapter 4. We need to learn to love what is worthy of love and to seek those things. We need to be discerning about how we spend our time and where we apply our talents. Let's not waste these resources on that which is unworthy.

Finally, The Apostle prays that the Philippian believers would pursue godliness, the fruits of righteousness to the praise and glory of God. If we are not committed to living in pureness, if we compromise our standards a little here or a little there, if we think that our good deeds in some areas of our lives make up for our lack of holiness in others, then we are fooling ourselves. We may fall here or there, but we should not be complacent about our failings. In our corporate prayers, we consistently confess our failings and hear God's forgiveness. May

righteousness also be a concern in our individual prayer lives. May we be loathe to sin and quick to repent.

Given all of this, let us question our own community and our own lives within it: are we living in godly compassion and mercy with each other here at Christ the King? Do we see the example set for us by St. Paul and the Philippian believers lived out here within our parish? I would answer this, yes and no. Yes, there are some great things happening here. We are a welcoming parish, and we enjoy each other's company. But I also think there is room for improvement for the standard set for us by God and demonstrated by The Apostle Paul is very high.

I would like to challenge you with two very specific tasks this week. First, this morning's bulletin contains the list of families here at Christ the King. Though I earlier mentioned that I tend to have an "out of sight, out of mind" thinking style, this does not mean that I don't pray for you all. It simply means that I have to enact disciplines to make sure that I keep you all in my heart in bringing you in prayer to our Heavenly Father. Your first challenge this week is to pray at least once for everyone on this list. You can mention them in prayers all at one time or maybe just mention a few names each day. And then do it again next week, and the week after that, and the week after that. We are each other's keeper.

Secondly, pick one person from our parish, outside of your family group, and then let them know that they are appreciated or do something nice for them. This could be just dropping them a quick text or calling them or just telling them in person that they are noticed and that their presence makes a difference. These are just little things that communicate care and concern. If we treat each other with compassion, if we learn to better love each other as Christ loves us, then we will not only be quicker to forgive offenses, but we will be much less likely to offend each other to begin with.

As the Body of Christ, may we learn to be more merciful, more compassionate, and more loving. May we always plead to God for help, not only in the times of stress and difficulty, but also for help in living out the standard of love and compassion that He has set for us. This isn't just a task in the "To Do" list, but it really is the most joyful and fulfilling manner of life. Let us truly embrace those around us as we also are embraced and surrounded by the love of Christ.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. AMEN.