

n 240a, 2017

Ludwig van Beethoven composed a magnificent Concert Mass in honor of his dear friend Archduke Rudolph of Austria, considered by many to be one of his finest works. He labored on this piece for several years, completing it in 1823, because he wanted every note, every word, to be perfect, in the hope, as he wrote to the Archduke, “that the music would instill religious feelings in those who perform it, and those who hear it.” When, at last, the score was complete, he scribbled a personal wish at the top of the manuscript: “Written from the heart—may it go to the heart.”

In our gospel lesson today, Jesus calls us to some important and difficult “heart work,” the work of forgiving those who sin against us, those who have offended us in some hurtful way.

Alexander Pope, the great poet of the Enlightenment wrote: to err is human, to forgive divine. And in just 7 words, he sums up today’s gospel. Jesus calls us to the divine gift of forgiving those who wrong us. And as we all know, this is easier said than done—perhaps this is so because we regard forgiveness as a feeling rather than a process. Ultimately, forgiveness requires faith, effort and determination. Today’s gospel is really a very engaging parable: Jesus does not just tell a story, he tells his parable in such a way that we get involved in it; it’s like street theater or improvisation. This gospel makes a crucial link between God forgiving us and us forgiving one another.

It is a parable about a senior official who has incurred a debt of 10,000 talents. It is difficult to make a meaningful comparison in today’s currency, but it would be approximately 1.5 billion dollars. To get a perspective on this outrageous number, consider that the entire tax

revenue for King Herod the Great, the current ruler over Judea at this time, was only 900 talents. Consequently when the servant begged the king for more time to raise the money for his incredible debt, this idea that he would be able to do so is sheer nonsense. He would not be able to raise that much money if he worked every day for 150,000 years.

But here is the kicker; the king simply forgave the debt—every last cent. You would think that the servant would be changed forever, so overwhelmed by this incredible and undeserved forgiveness. But instead, he simply left the king's chambers as an unchanged man, perhaps thinking he had somehow outsmarted the king, or that the king was just getting senile. And so to the shock of all who hear this parable, this man who was forgiven an impossible debt began to torment and punish a fellow servant who owed him very little. Of course, we know how the parable ends, as the king settled the score against the man who learned nothing from his own received grace. Wasted grace is a terrible sin. How tragic to see this man with a heart so clogged that it would not pump back the grace he himself had received.

Today's parable is telling us that if we continue to sin, without any interest in conversion, then going to confession becomes a game, a game that God is unwilling to play. This message made that abundantly clear insofar that anytime we refuse to forgive another human being, then that is a sin against God. After all, we can't go running to God asking forgiveness for our sins when we are unwilling to forgive those who have hurt us. Recall that every time we say the Lord's Prayer, we commit ourselves to this way of thinking: Forgive us our trespasses AS we forgive those who trespass against us. But do we really mean what we say? Do we even think about forgiving someone who has hurt us when we pray the Our Father?

Here it might be helpful to make a couple clarifying remarks:

This teaching does not mean turning a blind eye to a person who keeps on doing hurtful things to us. Forgiveness is more than just saying words; it involves the restoring of a broken relationship. It involves a healing on both sides. Our main concern should not be ourselves, but the well-being of the other person whose actions have really hurt us (let me repeat that). Sometimes we become completely obsessed by what is happening to me and do not take time to reflect upon what is behind the other person's behavior.

And so Forgiveness is not purely a unilateral act. It is only complete when there is reconciliation between the two parties. However, it is difficult for me to fully forgive when the other party remains totally unrepentant. Even God's forgiveness cannot penetrate an unrepentant heart.

Forgiving in the full Christian sense is a form of loving and caring for others and that is one reason why the Church is so against the death penalty because, in a sense, we are not all born equal. Too often hating or angry people are nearly always more hurting in themselves than the object of their hatred or anger. Some grew up in families so filled with animosity and savagery that there is no wonder that these human beings are able to do beastly things. The Church is based upon hope, hope of conversion, hope that given time, a monster can again become human. We as Christians don't have the right to give up on anyone, regardless of how vicious their actions. The atrocity of 9-11 is a real test to this call for forgiveness. After all, the ultimate purpose of human relationships is to allow God's love to flow freely among people and to transfuse His love with our own love. But if we refuse to forgive anyone, we place a tourniquet on the flow of that love. Our personal

feelings must be secondary, as well as our sense of justice or vengeance.

Whether or not our anger is justified, whether or not we have been wronged, whether or not the World Court judges in our favor—if we do not forgive, we are responsible for blocking God's love

Furthermore, I may even come to be aware that I am sometimes partly responsible for their actions. I can well ask myself: "What is it in me that makes this person act this way?" When I approach a mutual problem in this way, forgiveness and reconciliation become so much easier. And I will more likely reach out in compassion to the hurts and weaknesses of others more often.

It is also true that people who are fully secure in the knowledge of being total loved by God and of their own loveliness are not going to find forgiveness and reconciliation as difficult as those who have hearts full of pain.

God and the Church can forgive the repentant sinner, but they cannot condone unrepentant behavior that is a source of real evil and suffering. God cannot be reconciled with the sinner who chooses to stay in sin, nor can the Christian community fully incorporate a member who refuses reconciliation and healing of behavior that offends against truth and love.

It may not be popular to propose this, but perhaps the only "weapon" that will bring us lasting security and peace is the weapon of a forgiveness that leads to reconciliation. Stubbornly, we have tried to make violence and revenge a solution, but it has not worked...maybe it's time to try something else...