

Grace and Mercy

Today's gospel recounts a familiar story--the one about the loaves and the fishes. Its a miracle story. Something wondrous happens. People get a free lunch, or in this case a free dinner. They get something for nothing.

Now, why would Jesus even think that he should try to feed these people? They must have known that it was getting late, they certainly knew that they were getting hungry. But they were captivated by his words. They lost track of time. They could eat later. They could skip dinner.

But Jesus didn't want them to leave hungry. He wanted to be a gracious host. After all that is the kind of God he was preaching, not a warrior God to be approached in fear and trembling, but a gracious God.

And this is part of what we mean by grace. That we don't always get what we deserve, that sometimes we get better than we deserve. We can catch a break from time to time, we can be forgiven our sin, we can be saved from ourselves. Not everybody believes that this can happen, you know, or that it should happen.

Buddhists for example believe in karma--that our actions have consequences and that we must live with those consequences. As a teacher, I have come to learn that there is a profound truth to the notion of karma. People do have to be held accountable for their behavior. You can't just let people off the hook all the time. Teachers can't always be saying "Oh. Your dog ate your homework? Or, your printer ran out of ink? Well that's OK. I'll let it slide.." Or if someone has a drinking problem or a drug problem. We may forgive but we cannot simply forget, pretend that nothing happened. Forgiving cannot mean enabling. We all do have to take responsibility for our lives, they are our lives after all.

But sometimes it is appropriate to let one another off the hook. Sometimes it is right to give one another a break, to give ourselves a break--like Jesus does in today's story. We used to have a restaurant down the street, Bears Café. They were evangelical Christians whose restaurant was their ministry. They had printed on their menu that if you were hungry but did not have any money, to let the waitress know and she would give you something to eat. They were not a charity. They were a business. But a business who wanted to be charitable to those who could use a meal in a time of crisis. I don't know how often someone would take them up on their

offer. Not often enough to feel they were been scammed. Not often enough to reverse their policy. That it worked said a lot about them and a lot about our community out here.

The alternative is to live in an unforgiving world--a place where you need to be vigilant to avoid making a mistake, a world where you can't be too careful. Such a world is just too nerve-wracking to live in. We need to be able to trust, not just that people will be fair, not just that everyone will play by the rules, but that sometimes, when we get ourselves into a real jam, even though its our own stupid fault, that sometimes, someone will give us a break or already has given us that break unawares. That someone, perhaps someone who knows what its like to be in our shoes, that someone will reach out and help us get back up on our feet again.

Unfortunately however there can't be any handy rules for when we should give one another a break and when to hold each other to the rules. If there were then it wouldn't be a break anymore, it would just be following another rule—a more nuanced rule perhaps, a more humane rule, but still justice not mercy, still merit not grace.

In this parable Jesus is not trying to teach us a new rule. No rule like "Always give people free lunches." or "You have a right to expect free lunches from good Christians." Rather the gospel seems to be saying, "Whatever the rules are, don't follow them blindly" Sometimes people need a break from the rules. The gospel teaches us to be attentive to each another, to be sensitive to one another's needs, to be alert to when it might be better to not let justice take its course, when it might be better to forgive rather than to punish.

This is what so aggravated Jesus about the Pharisees--not that they weren't ethical, not that they didn't follow the rules, not that their rules were wrong--after all, Jesus himself followed those same rules. They were his rules too. He was a good observant Jew. No, what aggravated Jesus was that the Pharisees followed God's law blindly--religiously, they might have said--but mercilessly Jesus complained. In their upholding of the rules, they didn't seem to be concerned about whether, in a particular, concrete case following the Law might crush a fragile reed, snuff out a flickering flame, destroy life rather than protect it.

This is what incensed Jesus. It was not their rules, but the Pharisees' blind following of those rules which Jesus condemned. "Man was not made for the Sabbath," he would say, "the Sabbath was made for man." Jesus insisted that his Father was not a God of commandments, but

a God of love--a God who could mix justice with mercy, accountability with grace. A God who is not blind but, who, now and then, when we are really hungry and we're all out of food, a God who can give us not so much what we deserve but what we need. Augustine tells a story of when he was a kid he picked pears off a neighbor's tree and through them at pigs in the field. It became a paradigm of sin for him. He didn't do it because he was hungry. He did it for the sheer fun of breaking the rules. But he also recounts another time when he was hungry and took an apple from another neighbor's tree by the roadside. Once again he heard the voice of God. But this time God said: "Take two."

Mercy has been the emphasis of Pope Francis' pontificate. Not: let's change the rules, but let's not follow them blindly. Let's be attentive to each other. Our primary commitment should be to the person, not the principle.

May we live likewise. May we both give and receive random acts of kindness. And may we live in a society where being down does not necessarily mean you are out. I tell my students that a society is to be measured not simply by how few of its people are poor but by how a society cares for whoever is poor. As Jesus says, the poor you shall have with you always. Or as he also says, you can't be saved if you cannot admit that you have ever sinned. Christians are not born saints. They are born sinners, seeking to be better than they are, sinners trying to become saints. And so, as Pope Francis emphasizes, mercy becomes us.