

***“Measure for Measure”***

In his play, Measure for Measure, William Shakespeare maps out how things often work in a society where getting even is the rule. The drama involves a Duke who leaves in charge a man, named Angelo (what else?), who holds a reputation for fastidious probity, but who is in reality a rake. This man becomes smitten by a novice nun whose brother has been given a death sentence for impregnating his betrothed. When she appeals to this pious pretender, he offers to commute the death sentenced if she will agree to sleep with him. Her reply amounts to *“How can I expunge his death sentence only by giving myself over to eternal death?”*

In a most convoluted plot, the nun appeals to a priest (who is really the duke in disguise) who provides her an “out”: if she agrees to the offer to sleep with Angelo; in her stead another woman will arrive at the boudoir, a woman whom Angelo was supposed to marry but abandoned when her dowry was lost at sea; the death sentence for the nun’s brother will be thus commuted (although it was staged so that Angelo thinks it has been carried out); Angelo is unmasked for his perfidy (sorry, you watch a little Shakespeare and such words just fly back into your vocabulary); the rascal Angelo is married to the woman he had scorned (a fitting retribution?), spared beheading (the fate he had commanded for the nun’s brother), and removed from office; the nun’s brother is released from prison and restored to marry his betrothed; others are elevated for good deeds (e.g. a provost who had done the duke’s bidding) and one condemned to death for slandering the duke (any message there is our day and age?); the nun is found be the object of the duke’s affection and they walk off stage hand in hand with the cheers of the populace to be wed.

“Measure for measure” winds up being a satisfying story about comeuppance. The bad guys get it in the end (maybe not fully but enough); the good guys wind up as good guys. In short, everyone gets what they deserve. They all get “measure for measure.”

I was attracted by Shakespeare's the title, because of what Jesus says in today's Gospel: ***"Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back."*** Jesus is not talking about retribution — seeing to it that the good get what's coming to them and the bad gets theirs as well. Jesus addresses himself to forgiveness . . . plain and simple.

Reflecting on the entirety of Jesus' preaching, Richard A Jensen writes: *"Jesus' word for us today is: 'I call you to live your lives out of an alternative vision of reality. I call you to live your lives as lives that reverse the values of this culture. I call you to love your enemy; turn the other cheek; give your possessions to those in need and judge not the lives of others. Be merciful even as I am merciful. I have come to nourish your entire life with my mercy. I have come to empower you with mercy in order that you may, indeed, live a new kind of life in this world'"* [Preaching Luke's Gospel, p. 82].

But this is not easy for us to grasp nor to live out. I think Norman Habel has identified why:

*"My Lord,  
I'm sure that you must realize by now  
that you are asking me to do the impossible.  
At least it's impossible for me.  
I can't love other people all the time.  
I have trouble loving myself sometimes.  
Other people are different  
or disgusting  
or dull  
or dirty.  
And I hate dirty people.  
They make me sick.  
There are some people I don't even want to love,  
or like,  
or help,*

*or understand,  
or go through the agony of forgiving.  
They do things to annoy me.  
or they get on my nerves  
and make me mad.  
Others are really enemies.  
Do you understand, God, my enemies?" [Interrobang, p.46]*

Our sinful selves just balk at the very idea of dealing with people as Jesus says we should — no! Let me rephrase that: as the Holy Spirit enables us to deal with them.

We would like very much to have all the forgiveness that we feel we need, except maybe for those times when we are pretty sure there is nothing in us that needs forgiveness. That line *“I have trouble loving myself sometimes,”* should reverberate in our minds and hearts — both when we realize that we are struggling to love ourselves and when we are not .

We entered into our worship this morning saying this: **“Loving God, Lord of the Church, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word and deed: we have not loved you with all our heart or served you with all our strength; we have been blind to the vision of a renewed world and deaf to your call to costly discipleship; we have been indifferent to the suffering of others and unwilling to forgive one another. In your mercy, Lord, pardon and restore us, that together in the ministry of Christ we may serve you with joy all the days of our life. Amen.”**

Of course you could argue, *“You made us say those things, Pastor,”* and in a sense that is true; I did have those words printed in the bulletin. But ought not that (or at least something very like it) be in our prayers daily? Do we not need to realize how much we stand in need of forgiveness AND can we not hear and appropriate God’s word of forgiveness to us?

The word “hear” in Greek is ακουω (akouo); it can be intensified as

ὑπακούω (hypakouo), which is usually translated as “obey” but literally means “beyond hearing.” Did you more than hear the words said in response to that prayer of forgiveness? “*Hear then the word of grace and the assurance of pardon: Your sins are forgiven.*” How do we get to that “more than hear” posture?

Look at the Second Lesson from I Corinthians; it places our focus to what is always our source of hope and joy. This is now the third Sunday that we have heard from the fifteenth chapter of I Corinthians, what is known as ‘the resurrection chapter.’ “*But it’s not Easter,*” you may want to say . . . Oh, yes it is!

This came up the Pastors Conference I attended on Tuesday, when one of the Pastors pointed to the argument he gets every year about dropping the “Alleluia” during Lent (as we do here). This Pastor said his organist didn’t like it left out. His response to that was that it might be okay to leave it in for Sunday’s worship, but at Wednesday Midweek, it had better be gone. If you pay close attention you realize that we today observe the *Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany*, and back on December 19 we observed the *Fourth Sunday of Advent*; on March 6 we will observe the *First Sunday in Lent*. That is to remind us that every Sunday is a celebration of Easter, so we have in “the forty days of Lent” an actual count of forty-six days from Ash Wednesday to Holy Saturday because there are this six “islands” in this sea of Lent called Sundays, and every one of them is a celebration of Easter. [Admittedly, this is inconsistent; we “should” use the Alleluia on Sunday and maybe would if everybody also showed up on Wednesday, but that doesn’t happen so we let the penitential observance stand on Sunday, as well. (Was that a tad legalistic of me? Yeah.)]

The point is that we “belong to the Easter people” (as we will sing at the end of the service, which should be demonstrated in our daily living). How do we demonstrate that? That question takes me to today’s First Lesson.

If you are familiar with the story of Joseph, you can fill in some of the

back story; but if you are not familiar with it, the poignancy of the scene in today's pericope is subdued. I encourage you to go back and read the whole narrative in Genesis 37-47 (you might also want to give a listen to Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat by Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber).

Just to highlight these things: Joseph's brothers were so jealous of him and his dreams that it came to the point where some of them wanted to kill him. One brother, Reuben, tried to thwart the plot to kill him by having him thrown into a pit (from which he planned to rescue him later). But before Reuben could effect that rescue, the other brothers decided to sell Joseph as a slave to a passing Ishmaelite caravan, which carried him off to Egypt. He was then sold as a slave to a wealthy man named Potiphar, whose wife falsely accused Joseph of sexual assault, and he wound up in jail. After several years in jail, he was brought before the Pharaoh, correctly interpreted his dreams that foretold of a coming famine, and was elevated to the position of "governor of the land" of all Egypt to deal with that famine. The famine extended up into the area where Joseph's family lived, and ten of his brothers ventured to Egypt to secure food. This was the perfect set-up for Joseph to get his revenge.

Which is where today's pericope picks up the story. Joseph does not exact his (some would say deserved) revenge on brothers who had tried to kill him, then sold him off like so much chattel. Instead, he says to his brothers, "***Come closer to me,***" and made it plain to them that he had come to understand that "***it was not you who sent me here, but God ...***"

What a phenomenal insight that is! Joseph was enabled to see the hand of God at work on his life. I suspect that, in the pit where his brothers had tossed him, bound and led away by the Ishmaelites, sold to Potiphar, falsely accused of rape, thrown into prison that Joseph could have easily given himself over to depression, self-pity, and despair.

It is at that point that Rice-Webber catch the proper mood in their musical (this song closes the first act):

*"Close every door to me, hide all the world from me*

*Bar all the windows and shut out the light  
Do what you want with me, hate me and laugh at me  
Darken my daytime and torture my night.  
If my life were important I would ask will I live or die  
But I know the answers lie far from this world  
Close every door to me, keep those I love from me,  
Children of Israel are never alone  
For I know I shall find my own peace of mind  
For I have been promised a land of my own.”*

That is not exactly an Easter hope, but it comes close; it realizes that, no matter the current circumstances, God is not finished until God is finished, which means that even death cannot be a final word. The Spirit will give each of us that insight when we open ourselves to being enlightened to know. In God’s unfinished symphony of your life, there come many times when you need spiritual awareness of what God might be doing; a new sight to see God’s hand at work.

I cannot count how many times I have come to the realization that what just happened was, in fact, “a God thing.” Sometimes I come to that awareness on my own (mostly by hindsight); sometimes some else will see it and point me to it. I was talking with someone this week who told me she was involved in trying to get her dog to “do his thing” on a cold, snowy, nasty day; it was not going well, and as she was struggling to get the job done and get back into the warmth of the house, a woman was walking her dog down the sidewalk, and seeing this woman struggling with the uncooperative pet, said to her, “***This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.***” [Psalm 118:4] It changed this woman’s whole day; I would say it gave her “Easter eyes and ears.” It was, in that moment, “a God thing.”

Which bring me to today’s Gospel, continuing Luke’s version of what is Matthew is called The Sermon on the Mount. Jesus says, “***... the measure you give will be the measure you get back.***” This is not the “measure for measure” of Shakespeare’s duke who metes out punishment, retribution,

and restoration as he deems fit (and which many of us in many circumstances seem warranted).

Listen to Jesus with Easter ears, Easter people: ***“Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap...”*** Do you catch the imagery? You have a bushel basket of deficit that needs to be filled by God’s grace (if you give it enough thought, you can visualize just how depleted your basket is). So what does God do? He fills your basket with blessings of mercy, forgiveness, grace, joy, hope, peace. And when your basket has been filled, he doesn’t stop; he presses down so that more blessings can be poured in; then he shakes the basket so that the blessings settled for more yet to come; and when the basket has been thrice filled, the blessings keep coming to overflowing.

I know, maybe you’re inclined to say, *“My life has not been that full.”* But that’s not your Easter eyes seeing or your Easter ears hearing.

Reflecting on that passage someone (I don’t recall who; it might have been a Pastor by the name of Don Abdon) once made the observation that God’s blessings are like a silo filled with grain. We stand at the bottom of that silo with our little beach shovel and pail, and begin to draw out what we feel or think we need. Meanwhile, God is atop the silo with a steam shovel, filling the silo to the brim and over. In other words, his blessings are unending, inexhaustible.

Of those blessings, we might be permitted to think that forgiveness is one of the prime benefices. Because God’s forgiveness is so expansive, so effusive, so bountiful, there is absolutely no way, and no reason, for us to keep it to ourselves. We will want, at times, to squeeze in some “measure for measure,” you know, and little payback? No, we Easter people know that the God, who is not done with us ever, gives us gifts to be shared, not scores to be evened.

Jesus tells us that anybody can do “measure for measure,” ***“even sinners”*** can do that. We are called to something other than that; we are called to

give as we have been given out of the richness of God's coffers.

But the question remains: How? Allow me finish Norman Habel's poem:

*How can I love people the way that you demand,  
forgetting about my own needs, to rescue them?*

*It's impossible.*

*And yet you say that people who do not love do not know God.*

*Don't I know you, God?*

*I want to know you.*

*If you can love me all the way,*

*if you can surrender yourself into my hands,*

*if you can give yourself to die for me,*

*yes, if you can love like that,*

*you must be God, I think.*

*But I can't seem to love, and I can't see you.*

*I strive to pose a front,*

*a masquerade of love and concern for others,*

*for the ugly and the idiot.*

*But I know the sham I have created and so do you.*

*I need another step, I need a lift, I need a power,*

*I need something more*

*than this image of perfect suffering,*

*of Christ the love of God hanging on my wall.*

*I need you, God, within me.*

*I need some love genes driving me, driving me to love,*

*to forgive, and to accept forgiveness from those I cannot love.*

*Please God, may others who have loved*

*show me that power now to love the loveless and the dying,*

*to forgive the unforgivable and the lying*

*before it is too late.*

*Bind me to Christ*

*and make me over again.*



Christ is Risen! He is risen indeed. His new life is not just measure for measure. It is “*good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over ... put into your lap.*” This is indeed the day that the Lord has made. We will rejoice and be glad in it.

Amen.