

Twenty-fourth Sunday *per annum*
Year A, 2026

Sir 27:30-28:7

Rom 14:7-9

Ps 103

Mt 18:21-35

Forgiveness and gratitude: a parable about debts

Blowing things out of proportion, when we take a little thing and make it a big thing. A molehill becomes a mountain. A tempest in a teapot. We've got plenty of sayings that express this wisdom in playful, but poignant terms.

Morally serious people frown upon making a big deal over nothing, and we teach our children that the little setbacks in life, the inevitable inconveniences that come with being human in contact with other humans in a fallen world should be met with forbearance and magnanimity (which is a kind of generous high-mindedness), and not with "*wrath and anger*," which, according to our first reading from Sirach, are "*hateful things*" hugged tight by the sinner.

But what to make of a person who seems to "*nourish anger against another*," who seems eager to be offended, ready to be taken aback, willing to relish wallowing in grievances and perceived personal affronts, and who does so perhaps even loudly and publicly? Such a one is not wrongly described as nit-picking, exacting, petty, humorless, merciless. "*Can anyone nourish anger against another and expect healing from the Lord?*" asks Sirach. Such a one who "*cherishes wrath*" will have no one to forgive his or her own sins, not even God.

The cultural moment in which we live is one in which everything is permitted, but nothing is forgiven. The more this cultural moment gains momentum, the less humane our culture will become. When the little molehills of our faults are made out to be insurmountable mountains, then unforgiveness becomes a grim pastime, a cultural blood-sport, wherein cruel vengeance is exacted upon those who in some way, even a slight way, trespass against the ever-shifting norms and rules of such a culture.

I am thankful that God is not like this, and that God does not work this way with us. With God, some things are *not* permitted, but all things can be forgiven. In the psalm's responsory we sang, "*The Lord is kind and merciful, slow to anger, and rich in compassion.*" This is true, and it is repeated over and over again in the scriptures. But it is equally true, as revealed to us in our first reading from Sirach, that the Lord will remember in detail the sins of those who are vengeful, who fail to show kindness, mercy, and compassion, and they will suffer his righteous anger.

Which brings us to the gospel. A little earlier I mentioned the problem of blowing things out of proportion, taking tiny, insignificant things and affording them a disproportionate importance. But what about the opposite tendency, no less vicious, of underestimating the meaning and importance of some big thing and treating it as if it were trivial and insignificant?

In the parable of the unforgiving servant, we should take notice of how the divine Master, Jesus, portrays the happenings of this parable. Witnessing the vile conduct of the unforgiving servant – his ingratitude, his unforgiveness, his violence and out-of-bounds desire to get what is his, to take back what belongs to him – the other servants “*were deeply disturbed.*” Knowing the enormity of the debt that had just been forgiven the wicked servant, these other servants are indignant that the harsh servant would so brazenly refuse to extend some small mercy to another, one who owed him so little in comparison to the debt that he had just been forgiven.

Unfortunately, our English translation and two thousand years of historical context have made it difficult to appreciate the justness of the outraged reaction to the harsh servant’s transgression. But Jesus’ audience, steeped in the context of the parable, would have understood immediately, and their reaction would have been one of righteous anger and horror at the contemptible conduct of the harsh servant.

So let me explain. Literally, the gospel texts says that ten thousand talents (a talent was a unit of currency) is the debt that was forgiven (translated “*a huge amount*”). One hundred denarii, another unit of currency, is the debt that the harsh servant would not forgive (translated “*a much smaller amount*”). Let’s be clear, though, about the real proportions and the size of the debts we’re talking about.

One denarius was a day's wage for an unskilled day laborer. Maybe something like \$100 in today's currency. So, a debt of one hundred denarii comes to about \$10,000. That's what the fellow servant owed to the harsh servant. And to get back that amount of money, which is not a small sum, the harsh servant, with violence, contempt, and ruthlessness had his fellow servant thrown into prison.

But what about the debt that the master had just forgiven the harsh servant? He owed 10,000 talents. Now, a talent, as a unit of currency, was worth 6,000 denarii. So to be in debt for 10,000 talents, means 60 million denarii, which, in today's terms, comes to about \$6 billion dollars! His \$6 billion debt having just been forgiven, the harsh servant would not forgive a \$10,000 debt owed to him. And so now we can understand how the other servants were in fact right to be "*deeply disturbed*" at the enormity of the injustice and lack of gratitude that they had just witnessed.

We find it morally repugnant when a small thing is exaggerated and expanded to become something it's not, disfigured out of all proportion. This is making a mountain out of a molehill. A molehill. A little lump of loosened soil in the yard that is easily compacted by walking on it with a light tread.

But where is the moral opprobrium for the opposite, when we make a molehill out of a mountain, when something as important and impressive as a mountain is treated with utter contempt and

disregard? Can we not see how truly monstrous and grotesque it is to downplay something noble and majestic and to treat it as if it were nothing, a trifle hardly worthy of our attention?

It is reprehensible, and childish, and unbecoming to make mountains out of molehills, but I'm not sure I can find fitting adjectives to describe the opposite, when one makes a molehill out of a mountain. What would this be called? Shameful and shameless? Disgraceful? Dishonorable? Whatever the right word may be, such obliviousness is inexcusable.

The mountain imposes itself; it cannot be missed. And yet, when one misses the mountain, can there really be any just excuse for failing to see the mountain, for being impervious to its presence, oblivious to its majesty? What kind of shameful hardness of heart is this? What kind of heedless insensibility is this? Whatever this state of heart, mind, and soul is, it merits both contempt and condemnation. Which is precisely what the harsh servant receives.

In St John's gospel, we read the following: *"So when Jesus had washed [the disciples'] feet and put his garments back on and reclined at table again, he said to them, "Do you realize what I have done for you? You call me 'teacher' and 'master,' and rightly so, for indeed I am. If I, therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another's feet. I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do" (13:12-15).*

Does the harsh servant not realize what has just been done for him? He does not. And it is precisely that lack of awareness, that insensibility, that forgetfulness of mercy received that brings down the righteous anger and holy vengeance of the master in the parable. All that the wicked servant had gained is now lost, all because of his ... ingratitude.

Gratitude is the guarantor of justice. There is no justice, no righteousness, without gratitude, which is a thankful awareness of the sovereign power of God, whose holiness moves God to have mercy, not to punish; to forgive, not to condemn. Gratitude is *thankful awareness*: awareness and acknowledgment of what has been done for my benefit, which is followed by thankfulness for the good that I have received as a kindness, as a gift, unmerited, from the generosity of another.

Doesn't this description of gratitude as thankful awareness highlight the failing of the harsh servant? Unaware, oblivious to the obvious, he treated the majestic and noble mercy of his master as if it were something beneath notice, beneath contempt. He was not moved to *metanoia* ... to conversion ... by the mercy and kindness that had been shown to him. Isn't this why he is condemned, and rightly so? The mountain of God's mercy was for him a trifle, something of no account, like a molehill, to be pressed down underfoot. It was not noted or noticed, and so no thankfulness followed. If gratitude is thankful awareness, ingratitude seems to be careless indifference.

So here is a moral and spiritual take-away from the scriptures that we are given to contemplate today: indifference to God's mercies will not go unnoticed. Carelessness with God's grace will not go unpunished. Be aware, then, of what you have been forgiven, of what has been done for you, and as God has done for you, now you must also do for others, whose debt to you is miniscule in comparison to the debt that God has forgiven you, and simply because you asked.

The Lord has given us a new commandment, to love one another as he has loved us. In his love for us sinners, he has forgiven our trespasses. So now we in turn must, with thankful awareness, willingly and eagerly and promptly forgive those who trespass against us.

How else does the Lord's prayer even make sense, when Jesus teaches us to pray with these words: *forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us* ... or in another more literal English translation that perhaps captures the moment even more powerfully: *forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors*? For to you, O Lord, who are kind and merciful, slow to anger, and rich in compassion, belong the kingdom, the power, and the glory, now and forever. Amen.