

Twenty-fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Cycle C

Ex 32: 7-11, 13-14
Psalm 51: 3-4,12-13,17,19
I Tim 1: 12-17
Luke 15: 1-32

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One of the greatest challenges many of us face in striving to live out our Christian vocation in the real world, it seems to me, has to do with the issue of forgiveness. If the people we often see on newscasts - people who have been aggrieved, against whom some crime or injury has been committed - if such people are at all representative of the population at large, justice rather than mercy often seems to be the prevailing force that moves us. Punishment that fits the crime is the language we speak, but revenge and retaliation - an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth approach to life - sometimes seems to be the drive at work in us when we have been seriously offended. I've never been the victim of a serious crime, nor has anyone in my family, so I do not know how I might react to a deeply felt, personal act of violence. But I do know that there have been many occasions when I - like you, I am sure - have been filled with a sense of outrage at the injustices oftentimes visited upon innocent people.

Noticing this in myself and in others poses a challenge to me when I hear Jesus so often speak about and demonstrate the place of forgiveness in life - not simply in offering forgiveness but in accepting it as well. It leads me to wonder whether or not my - our - struggle with regard to forgiveness and mercy - in big issues as well as in small ones - makes it very difficult for us to fully accept that God can be as forgiving of us as Jesus makes him out to be. In the Gospel today Jesus was being criticized by the scribes and the Pharisees because he was associating with public sinners. They were scandalized by this behavior of his! If he were truly from God he would never do such a thing. They were evil people, who stood for the antithesis of everything that God and righteousness and holiness meant. But Jesus' response in the stories he tells - fantastic stories to describe the unbelievably generous, compassionate mercy of God - is this: "*Your God is too small. You've got God figured out all wrong. You imagine that because you find it difficult to be merciful, God must be unmerciful as well. My God, rather, he goes on to say, is someone who is so reckless in his generosity and so eager in his love that he is comparable to a shepherd who will leave the 99 safe sheep to go in search of the single lost one. He's like the woman who is so preoccupied with finding one small coin that she's lost, that she will empty the house out to find it, and once having found it will spend many times the value of that coin in celebrating her good fortune with her friends and neighbors.* The behavior of the shepherd and of the woman is obviously exaggerated - what reasonable person acts like this! But that is precisely the point Jesus wishes to make. God's tenacity, his recklessness in seeking out the one who has gone astray and his jubilation in celebrating his or her return cannot be grasped by reason alone. We can't figure

God out - and in this instance certainly not his concern and desire for us - according to our way of thinking and acting. Rather, the invitation is to always be prepared to break the idol or change the image we have created about what God is like and accept the one that Jesus reveals to us.

I think there are far too many people who find it hard to accept the welcome, the mercy the generosity that God holds out to them. They cannot forgive themselves and so imagine that God cannot forgive them either. We have to ask ourselves if we the Church, the institution as well as the community of faithful, make it easier or more difficult for people to see the true face of God in this regard. Is the impression of the Church that people have one of the compassionate Jesus who sat at table with sinners and invited them to deep interior freedom and peace? If not, how can we make it so? And if we can become more convinced ourselves that the God Jesus reveals is the **true** God, might that help us to become more compassionate, merciful, forgiving people ourselves? And can we then help a society that seems in many ways to be turning colder and harsher become once again more human and more humane?