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by Pat Marrin

[View Author Profile](#)

patrickjmarrin@gmail.com.

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March 8, 2021

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“Be patient with me” (Matthew 18:26).

Dn 3:25, 34-43; Matt 18:21-35

When I was in grade school, I decided to go for the perfect attendance award. It was a way to up my standing after some disastrous and humiliating losses at the weekly spelling bees, where I would clutch on words I knew, like “maneuver,” which I spelled “manure,” and was sent to the office for disrupting the class.

I was several months into perfect attendance when the pressure began to build. It wasn't a question of getting to school on time, since my Dad, who took us to early Mass with him, always got us there. What threw a curve in my plan was that I was becoming proud for striving to be perfect. I began to keep track of other kids who came late or missed school, hoping their failures would narrow the field. But I felt uncomfortable, almost dizzy as I reached new heights of perfection, which gave me an overview of all the slackers and excuse makers who didn't care or try to be as worthy as I was, thinking ahead to getting such a prestigious award.

The memory or perhaps the feeling of superiority, now filtered through 65 years of living anything but a perfect life, came to mind as I looked at today's Gospel about forgiveness. Jesus' brilliant parable about two indebted servants who needed mercy was directed at his disciples and others who didn't think they needed to be forgiven. They kept the Law perfectly and had earned God's approval and admiration. They found Jesus' teaching on forgiveness outrageous because it gave sinners a pass and undermined good people who had worked so hard to earn that pass.

The parable contrasts the million-dollar debt of the first servant who is forgiven gratis and the small debt of the second servant who is sent to prison by the first servant for not repaying it in full. The lesson is that we must forgive one another because we have already been forgiven by God. God's mercy is, in fact, the basis for our existence, given freely without merit, the sustaining love that never goes away as we stumble through life learning by our mistakes just like everyone else. We are all sinners who dream of wholeness and perfection because God is loving us toward the Beloved Community.

But it is the perfection of love that counts. The only thing that can keep us out of that community is if we imagine we are better than others, superior in virtue and effort and discipline and therefore worthy of special status. While legal perfection is possible for some, love is a lifetime process of learning to love others with the same love we need from them.

I never did get the perfect attendance award. Some friends saw what it was doing to me and made me late one morning. I felt much better after that.

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