Spirituality
Pencil Preaching





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“Deal with us in your kindness and great mercy” (Daniel 3:43).

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

In today’s first reading from the Book of Daniel, Azariah, also known as Abednego, is one of the three men cast into the fiery furnace by the king of Babylonia to test their faith. From within the fire, Azariah offers praise to Yahweh for the promise of salvation to the descendants of Abraham. In exile, though suffering for their sins and deprived of temple and sacrifice, the three heroes of Israel entrust themselves to their God and are spared death in the fire.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus is trying to explain to Peter why he and the other disciples should forgive others. They are, in comparison to the first reading, like Azariah, already in the fire, and yet God spares them. The first servant in the parable has been forgiven an amount so great he could never have paid it back. Should he not then forgive his fellow servant for a much smaller amount?

This argument is conclusive. We must forgive because we already have been forgiven. Our very existence is a matter of forgiveness. God loves each one of us in spite of our essential unworthiness. For this reason, we must always be open to forgiving one another. Jesus is driving home the reality of the human condition. We are all helpless before a loving God, who loved us while we were still sinners. Whether our debt is small or great, we come before God as helpless to save ourselves. Salvation is always a gift. Therefore, to be like our heavenly Father, we must always love and forgive one another.

This is Jesus’ answer to Peter, who is still trying to quantify forgiveness when he asks Jesus how many times he should forgive. Should it be seven times, a large number indeed? No, Jesus answers. You must forgive seventy times seven, a huge number. This is no hyperbole when compared to God’s forgiveness of us. God is like the rain and the sun that falls and shines on sinners and the righteous alike. Therefore, we should be like our heavenly Father if we wish to be called his children.

Would there be any order in the world if everyone forgave everyone an infinite number of times? Wouldn’t some people take advantage of this mercy? The point is that from our rising to our setting, we all offend others or are responsible for the suffering of others. Our very contingent existence competes with others for resources and position and privilege. However we wish to imagine life in this world,

we are all beholden to one another for the space we occupy and the food we eat. We live in continual dependence on one another. A way to understand this is the idea conveyed in Russian when people say “Goodbye” with *Proschaitye,* a word that means “forgive me.” This is also understood in the practice of the Jesus Prayer, “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me,” said by pilgrims as they wander through life. Is this not all of us, each of us, finding our way through the world in search of the God of infinite love?

Jesus wanted his disciples to keep before them always the truth that we live both in the fire of judgment and the rescue of God’s forgiveness. This is our existence, why the Gospel is nothing less than “Good News” we share geneously with our every breath. To know and practice this kind of unconditional love is to rebuild the Beloved Community constantly being torn down by comparing ourselves with others. To know ourselves as sinners is to enter and freely welcome others into the embrace of God’s astonishing love.

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