

God's Dream

At first glance, today's readings seem to be at odds with each other.

On the one hand, the gospel overflows with themes of love and forgiveness, with Peter asking: "How often must I forgive?"

With Jesus responding: "Don't add, multiply!" — then diving deeper into the quandary by telling the story of unimaginable forgiveness.

But then, there's God in our first reading, drowning the entire Egyptian Army in the Red Sea!

What do we make of God?

Is God a loving parent or a nationalistic avenger?

If you take the words of scripture from the surface of things, you can end up with a very twisted sense of who God actually is.

Like the folks who quote "spare the rod and spoil the child" to justify beating their kids.

In fact, the rod was used by shepherds to guide and nudge their flock, not to beat the bejeebers out of them!

That's why fundamentalism in every religion is so dangerous.

It takes what's intended to bring us into the depths, and exchanges it for apparently obvious, but frequently wrong, interpretations of Scripture.

That's the kind of thinking that misled radical Muslims to murder thousands on 9/11.

That's the kind of thinking that's trying to turn America into a right-wing theocracy.

We ought never forget that Scripture isn't God dictating God's word like a lawyer who calls in the secretary to take down a letter.

Rather, Scripture is one record (among many) of humanity's long conversation with God.

So whenever we encounter the words of Scripture, let's always try to understand those words through the eyes of the Word himself: through the life, compassion and joy of Jesus.

Which isn't an easy thing for folks like me, and maybe you too.

When we get right to it, we're pretty good at excusing ourselves — and blaming others.

When the threat of a searching self-examination comes near, most of us run!

All of which affects how we see God.

For example, if we dig a little deeper into the Pharaoh story, it's not God who's causing all the mayhem, it's Pharaoh!

Time and again Moses goes to Pharaoh, begging for the people's freedom.

Pharaoh repeatedly refuses.

Even as things go from locusts to frogs to blood red waters,
nothing changes his mind.

I've been there at times in my life.

Maybe you have too.

When the warning signs are everywhere that this situation is really
bad, whether it's a relationship, a job, drugs or alcohol.

And rather than turn around, I keep plowing ahead.

Until the explosion happens!

Then I stand there in shock asking:

"Why did you do this to me God?!"

But it's not God.

It's me.

Thankfully, it's at this point that Jesus takes us by the hand.

Inviting us to look inside.

Showing us a new way.

A way out of self-destruction.

A way into something amazing.

It's there in today's gospel.

While the story on the surface seems to be about forgiveness — if we go deeper, it's actually a story about the God who comes down.

Who lets go.

Who releases enormous debt — with reckless abandon.

At incalculable cost.

We so often think of God as the angry bookkeeper in the sky, keeping track of our every foible and blunder.

That's not the God of Jesus, nor is it the God of Moses.

Today's gospel tells us the truth about the character of God.

And it tells us the truth about God's dream for us.

If Jesus told the story today, he'd probably start off with:

"A man owed a king a kazillion dollars!"

That's how you'd say "ten thousand talents" today.

It's an unimaginable amount of money.

The Pharaoh of Egypt doesn't have that kind of dough.

It can't be repaid.

The fellow's plea for more time to pay is simply laughable.

Take all the time you want, you'll never pay back a kazillion dollars.

So what does the king do?

He comes down — and freely forgives the man's vast debt.

The king understandably hopes that the man who is forgiven will do likewise.

When word comes that the forgiven man has tossed the guy who owes him a hundred bucks in the clink, the king comes down even further.

He's worried about the second debtor — and his distraught friends.

And he's angry at the stinginess of the man forgiven so much.

That's what the wrath of God is all about.

It's God's determination that anything that stands in the way of compassion, gentleness and forgiveness — cannot stand.

And just like Pharaoh, what puts the stingy man in hell isn't God.

It's his own self.

His refusal to forgive, to let go, only results in staying in the quagmire of resentment and fear and vain efforts to be in control.

The misery of such an inner life is the very definition of hell, since by staying there, one is cut off from the life giving power of grace, of peace, of trusting that all shall be well.

And there is something else swimming beneath the surface of today's wonderful gospel story.

How much of our thinking about God and each other is all tied up with earning our salvation?

With being just good enough to squeak into the pearly gates when our time comes?

Or measuring ourselves against the other guy or gal, which in turn leads to condemning ourselves – or them?

But none of this is Christian thinking!

The heart of today's parables is a lot like the heart of the parable that's coming next week.

Next week we'll tune into the parable of the workers in the vineyard; some of whom show up at dawn and work all day, some who show up at 5 minutes to quitting time.

And lo and behold, both get the same pay!

It's a hard parable for most folks because it reeks of unfairness.

But think about it!

It's only "unfair" if what we're after is our just desserts, a fair reward for our efforts.

But if the work itself is the thing of beauty, if laboring in God's vineyard for 15 hours or 15 minutes is the place where peace and compassion and belonging is found, then who cares about the pay at the end of the day?

The work itself is the reward.

Just so in our life of faith.

If I work at Wallyhouse thinking this will earn me brownie points for heaven, in 10 minutes I'm going to be resentful and unhappy in the face of the many, and very often, unkind responses we get from those who receive from that house.

But if I work at Wallyhouse because I've come to realize that if I want to meet Jesus, that I'll most likely find him in the face of the beleaguered, then I'm happy and at peace, because recognizing Jesus in our midst is its own reward.

What's this have to do with today's parable?

Only everything!

If we live our lives from a place of letting go, of pouring out, in short, a place that doesn't cling to money, power, or just desserts, which is God's dream for us, we can grant release of everything bothersome, of every debt, to everyone.

Even to ourselves.

But if we live in the tit for tat world, we are doomed to be like the stingy man, who, though forgiven everything, cannot bear to forgive even a trifle.

Our faith calls us to live deeply into these mysteries of profound release.

And if we sit long enough with this, if we practice a life of letting things be and trusting in the ever present flow of God throughout all of creation, then we are able to grasp this ultimate truth:

“We don’t live to ourselves, nor do we die to ourselves.

If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord.

So then, whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s.”

As God’s dream becomes our dream too.

+amen