

## Reading Between the Lines

At first glance, the readings today put us in kind of a pickle.

On the one hand, we have the themes of love and forgiveness, with Peter asking how often must I forgive, with Jesus responding with multiplication not just addition, followed by a story of a man who's freely forgiven bazillions of dollars.

On the other hand, there's God drowning the Egyptians in the Red Sea, and there's Jesus warning that unless you too forgive, you might encounter God as a sadistic jailer.

So who is God, really; an angry drill sergeant or a loving parent?

If you take the words of scripture only from the surface of things, you're likely to 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 excuse 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 is so dangerous: it takes what is intended to bring us into the depths, and exchanges it for self-serving interpretations that merely skim the surface.

We can never forget that scripture is a result of humanity's conversation with God; it's not God dictating God's word like a lawyer might to her secretary.

So whenever we encounter the words, we must always remember what the Word himself, Jesus, teaches us with his life, with his example, with his walk.

But before we go there, let's spend a moment thinking about us.

You know, us, we people who are very good at excusing ourselves and blaming others, and running away whenever the threat of a searching self-examination comes near.

For example, if we dig a little deeper into the Pharaoh story, we come to see 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.

The warning signs are everywhere that this particular situation is really bad for us, whether it's a relationship, a job, drugs, money ... the list is endless, and rather than turn left, we keep plowing ahead, until the explosion happens, and we stand there in shock asking how could such a thing happen?!

That's often where God comes in, as in:

"How could you have let this happen God?!"

But it's not God, it's us.

Jesus takes us by the hand, he invites us to look deeply inside, and he shows us a new way, a way out of self-destruction, a way into something amazing.

We get a hint of these things in today's gospel.

While the story on the surface is about forgiveness — if we go deeper, it's a story of 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, just waiting for a chance to knock us down.

That is 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 dreams for us.

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

"A man owed a king a bazillion dollars!"

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

It's an unimaginable sum.

It cannot be repaid.

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

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

The king 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 five bucks in the clink, the king comes even further down, to look after the second debtor, and his distraught friends.

In your left hand, hold that thought of the king coming down, of releasing enormous obligation with reckless abandon, at great cost.

We'll get back there in a moment.

When we think of our spiritual growth, we often think of going up, of moving forward, of gaining rather than losing.

But when you really sit with the God who becomes a human being, the God who lives, eats, drinks, among us; the God who is brutally tortured and killed by us; perhaps you may begin to see that our own spiritual journey is not about going up, it's about going down.

Two stories may put some meat on these bones.

The first is called the "Gift of the Magi."

Della and James are newlyweds.

They are poor and their first Christmas finds them with no money to buy a gift for each other.

But each has a prized possession.

James has a gold pocket watch, a precious gift from his grandfather.

Della has rich auburn hair that reaches her waist.

James secretly sells his pocket watch to buy Della a silver comb for her beautiful hair.

Della cuts off her hair and sells it to buy James a gold chain for his treasured watch.

Christmas morning comes.

They stare, dumbfounded with each other.

It's a pointless, yet extravagant, sacrifice each has made.

Pointless -- unless love itself is the gift.

The other story is "Babette's Feast."

Babette is a celebrated Paris chef who loses everything.

She flees to Denmark and into the care of two aging nuns, who have given their lives to good works, trying to keep their declining religious order together.

When Babette arrives, the small community is exhausted; they are reduced to petty bickering.

Every effort to cheer them up fails.

Then out of the blue a letter from Paris arrives.

Babette's won 3 million francs in a lottery!

With her prize, Babette decides to treat these aging nuns to a real French banquet.

She brings in the finest foods, new china, embroidered tablecloths, silverware, champagne, cheese and choice meats.

With the meal prepared, the table set, candles blazing, the nuns stand astonished at the extravagance.

At first, they are shy, but soon, the mood lightens, and gratitude and forgiveness spread around the room.

Hours later, the slightly drunk but very happy crowd stumbles into the town square, singing and dancing together.

After a lifetime laboring in the fields of the Lord, "they've finally touched the wellspring, ... their hearts are overflowing." C. Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Jesus*, 67.

Someone asks Babette when she's leaving them for Paris, now that she's got all this money.

Babette says, "I don't have any money.

I spent every penny on the banquet!"

Is the gift wasted?

After all, the nuns will sober up by morning, and soon forget Babette's extravagant gift.

But now, look at what you're holding in your left hand, that sense of the king coming down, of the king letting go, of the king releasing enormous obligation with reckless abandon, at great cost, and you come to see that it doesn't matter if the nuns soon forget Babette's gift.

By throwing away her only chance to return to the life she knew, she becomes, for one night -- and perhaps -- for all time, the image of the self-giving, abundant, extravagant God.

She gave away a bazillion dollars.

Is it an unholy waste?

We might ask the same question of Jesus, hanging there on the cross.

It seems pointless -- unless love itself is the gift.

If we sit long enough with the scriptures, what emerges is the truth of our situation.

Our instinct is to hold tight and move high.

But the wisdom of God takes us elsewhere.

The wisdom of God, hanging there on the cross, is alive in Della's chopped off hair, in James' pawned watch, in Babette's feast.

All given with joy, and at great cost.

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