

Pope Francis has spoken at various times about the Corona pandemic asking Catholics and all people to respond to the crisis as one family. We must work on eliminating the injustices that undermine the health of all in the world. His fear is that we may “be struck by an even worse virus, that of selfish indifference. A virus spread by the thought that life is better if it is better for me, and that everything will be fine if it is fine for me.”

If we take the pope’s words to heart as one human family then the readings today will ask us to think hard about how mercy and forgiveness operate in our lives, in the community of humans, and in our relationship with God. Pope Francis declared a jubilee year of mercy a few years ago to focus our reflection on how indifference prevents us from being that one human family.

This section of Matthew today is called the Sermon on the Church. It addresses how we should relate to Christ and each other. The first reading from Sirach is similar to what Jesus says in the gospel today about mercy: how can you expect mercy from God if you do not know how to show mercy to others? Our mercy must always be seen in the light of God’s mercy. God is merciful no matter what. That mercy lasts for our lifetime. That mercy is also overwhelming. It is the mercy that forgives a lot, 70 times 7 times. Mercy and forgiveness must be offered always, and without even waiting for the other to ask.

The parable Jesus shares tells us that to practice mercy requires transformation. Mercy was supposed to change the other and yet it did not. What was forgiven? A huge impossible amount: 10,000

talents or 60 million days wages or more than 230,000 years of work! This was a deliberate exaggeration to make a point. 10,000 was the highest figure in arithmetic for the people of Jesus' time. A Jew would never have been trusted to manage that large an account. So, the listeners would have seen the first servant as a member of the rich class, who were rich at the expense of the poor. The thinking of the time was there was only so much to go around and if you had more then I had to have less.

When the king unexpectedly forgives, there is unbelief that such generous mercy could have happened. The parable creates a dilemma for the listener, namely how to think about non-punishment and mercy.

The second part of the parable is very different. There is little debt, but the forgiven servant shows only ruthlessness and violence. Now the listener sees an unforgiving person. The unforgiving servant must be punished and it seems as if it will be forever. He could not show the same mercy he was shown. His punishment is now as exaggerated as the original debt.

Jesus' story would have shocked the listeners, which was true for many of his parables. This story moved them to understand the unexpected possibilities of living in the reign of God. God is merciful to us, so we must show mercy to others. The parable is a warning that forgiveness can be forfeited.

Matthew knows his Christian community is not perfect. They had their prejudices. Matthew wants a community of care, tolerance, and kindheartedness. We are all in need of mercy, and thus must carry

Christ's unconditional love and forgiveness to all. 7 times 70 means always and forever. We need to admit we are not better than others. We all are sinners in need of God's mercy. Matthew's question to us is "Where do I go from here? What do I do about this?"

It is clear from the readings that we are not just called to forgive when convenient. We are called to an extraordinary mercy, a forgiveness of the heart. It is the heart that changes us and others. We can be transformed by mercy.

This virus has exposed so many things that are not right with our community and with the world. We see a disproportionate impact on the poorest and people of color. The pope is saying that through this difficult time we all need to hear a call to show mercy from the heart. It means we are committed to see all as sisters and brothers of the same God who is Father to all and who created all. It is not for us to judge. That is God's job. What we hear first and foremost today is God's mercy, which must be imitated.

May Mary, Mother of Mercy, help us practice that mercy is all we do.