Love Itself

At first glance, today's readings 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: "Don't just add, multiply!"

Then Jesus dives deeper into the quandary by telling them a story about this man who's freely forgiven a bazillion dollars.

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

So who is God, really?

A loving parent or an angry drill sergeant?

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 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.

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 see them through the lens of the Word himself: through the life of Jesus: his compassion, his joy.

Which is not 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, we keep plowing ahead.

Until the explosion happens!

Then we stand there in shock asking:

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

But it's not God.

It's us.

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 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 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 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 down even further.

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

Now, let's switch gears for just a moment.

In your left hand, hold onto the thought of the king coming down, recklessly forgiving enormous debt, at great cost to himself.

We'll get back there in just 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 isn't 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 golden pocket watch, a precious gift from his beloved grandfather.

Della has rich red hair that reaches to her waist.

James sells his pocket watch and buys Della a silver comb for her beautiful hair.

Della shaves her head, selling her hair to buy James a gold chain for his treasured watch.

Christmas morning comes and the gifts are exchanged.

And they stare, dumbfounded, at each other.

Dumbfounded at the pointless sacrifice each has made.

Pointless that is -- 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 some aging nuns, who've given their lives to good works, trying to keep their declining religious order together.

When Babette arrives, the small community is exhausted; 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 the lottery!

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

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

The meal is ready.

The table is set.

Candles ablaze.

And the nuns stand — astonished at the extravagance.

At first, they're shy, but soon, the mood lightens, as gratitude fills 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 moving back to Paris, now that she's got all this money.

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

I spent every penny on the banquet!"

Is the gift wasted?

After all, the nuns will soon sober up, and eventually, memories of Babette's extravagant gift will fade.

Now, take a look at what we've been holding in our left hand.

Of the king coming down.

Of the king forgiving enormous debt with reckless abandon, at great cost.

Can you see that it doesn't matter if the nuns soon forget Babette's gift?

Because, by throwing away her chance to return to her old life, she becomes, for one night -- and perhaps -- for all time, the image of the self-giving, recklessly extravagant, God.

She's given away a bazillion dollars!

Is it simply a waste?

We might ask the same question of Jesus, hanging 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 on tight and move up higher.

To protect ourselves and those we love.

But the wisdom of God points somewhere else.

The wisdom of God, hanging on the cross, is alive in Della's shaved head, in James' pawned watch, in Babette's feast.

Gifts given with reckless abandon!

Because — love itself is the gift.

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