

**Psalm 91 Lamentations 3:22-33 Romans 8:18-23 St. Luke 6:36-42**

Vertical and Horizontal

There's a wonderful line in Shakespeare's Hamlet that is overlooked by many. It is the scene where the Players have come to the Palace to reenact what Hamlet believes happened to his father as told to him by his father's ghost. He asks Polonius, who is a counselor to the king, to see to the needs of the Players to which Polonius, who looks down on these people because they are most probably lower class gypsies, replies: "My lord, I will use them according to their desert." Now listen carefully to Hamlet's reply: "God's bodkin, man, much better! (Don't you just love Shakespeare? – just so you all know, God's bodkin, or "God's little body", is a reference to the host, so this is a rather strong and solemn oath) Use every man after his desert, and who shall 'scape whipping? Use them after your own honour and dignity. The less they deserve, the more merit is in your bounty. Take them in." Polonius, who already believes the king's son is losing it, does not argue.

But I want you to think about that line...if we all get what we deserve, which one of us will escape punishment? So, then, does it not follow that in our dealings with our fellow fallen friends and foes we should be mindful not to give them what we think they deserve, but rather to treat them as we ourselves would like to be treated – with mercy and grace? Is that not what we learn in the prayer our Lord taught us to pray...“forgive us our trespasses” (in other words do not give us what we deserve)...but then Jesus qualifies the measure of that forgiveness by adding “AS we forgive those who trespass against us.” To simply paraphrase the line we could say, “Lord, do to us as we do to others.”

One of the biggest problems in the Church today is that while we think we do fairly well on the vertical (our relationship with God) we tend to stink when it comes to the horizontal (our relationship with other people)...which, in fact means we are not doing as well as we thought on the vertical either, because Jesus taught that there were two great commandments, love God and love your neighbor, and both are like unto the other...two sides of the same coin, as it were, as a lack of love for neighbor, whom we have seen, indicates a lack of love for God, Whom we have not seen, to quote St. John loosely.

But there is a more fundamental reason why we ought to love both vertically and horizontally and that is because by doing this we mirror the character of the One we call both Father and Lord. The love the members of the Trinity have for each other and the love they have for the world should also be evident in the lives of those who claim to follow Him. For instance, in our Gospel lesson, Jesus says that we ought to be merciful just as our Father is merciful. His character becomes the standard by which we are to measure our actions towards others. Think on this: What am I saying about my own character if I am all too willing to accept God's mercy towards me, while I am not willing to extend mercy to those who, like me, are not deserving? Am I not a two-faced hypocrite of the worst degree? And yet you see this all too often in the lives of many members of Jesus' Church today. Like Polonius we have somehow missed the message of the Gospel that all (including us) have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God and we have come to believe that we are justified in giving others according to what we think they deserve...according to their deserts. But dearest beloved brethren, are we not all spiritual beggars feeding from the same table of mercy and grace?

Our Old Testament lesson for today is particularly illuminating. Remember who wrote these words...Jeremiah, the heartbroken prophet with a heartbroken message. Jeremiah's ministry was surely one of the most frustrating of all of God's servants because for 40 years his warnings and pleadings went unheeded by those he loved dearly: his own countrymen. The book we call Lamentations is his lament – his five-poem funeral oration, if you will, for his people. You see, by the time he wrote this book, all his prophetic utterances had come to pass...the proud and arrogant city of Jerusalem had been reduced to a smoking rubble by the Babylonians. So the prophet is in mourning as he writes this poem...and yet, in the middle of this dirge, he suddenly turns from anguished mourning to hope-filled rejoicing. In verse 22 of chapter 3 the prophet makes an amazing statement. Listen carefully. "Through the Lord's mercies we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not." Now, this verse could also be rendered, "The Lord's many kindnesses never cease, because His great compassion never comes to an end." But whichever way we translate the Hebrew, the verse still tells us that our hope is founded upon God's consistent kindness to us based, not upon our merits or our just deserts, but rather on His great compassion.

What's more, these kindnesses of God founded upon His great compassion are renewed, Jeremiah tells us in the very next verse, every single morning, , and because my spiritual inheritance rests in the hands of this consistently kind and compassionate God, I have hope. And because of this hope, it is wise and good for those who trust in God to wait for Him and to continue to seek Him quietly trusting that He will bring His goodness to bear upon whatever calamity may have befallen us. To question God during times of trial would be to express doubt in His kindness and compassion and His mercy and

goodness...while resting in the sure knowledge of His unchanging and unfailing character is to have hope in His salvation. As Jeremiah says in verses 31 to 33, the Lord's chastisement has its limits because it is unwillingly applied. God would much rather bless us than afflict us. But He always wants the best for us and He knows that He is the best...so in His infinite love He does discipline us when we head in a different direction away from Him because the purpose of His discipline is always to draw us back to the greatest good in the universe, which is, of course, Himself.

Now, it goes without saying that if the God Whom we call our Father and Lord is merciful and good to all who wait on Him, and if He prefers to show compassion on us rather than judgment and if He only resorts to punishment as a last resort, well then we as His children ought to show some or other form of family resemblance, don't you think? And that's the crux of our Lord's message in our Gospel lesson for today. "You therefore be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful." This statement summarizes everything He said before about loving our enemies, doing good to those who hate us, blessing those who curse us, praying for those who spitefully use us and so on. (Just imagine if we actually took Jesus at His Word and dared to live exactly as He tells us to live in this passage!) And it also forms the basis upon which the rest of His injunctions are founded. Do not judge, do not condemn, give liberally and sacrificially, and so on. The reason for this is because a censorious and selfish spirit does not mirror His image. Those who delight in seeking out the bad in all are the blindest of the blind...they have forgotten their own need for mercy and grace...their own spiritual poverty.

No, if we dare to call ourselves "followers of Jesus", we had better begin to imitate His character by doing what He tells us to do...because it is only as we learn to be like our

Father...it is only as we come face to face with our own awful hypocrisy in judging others, of refusing to forgive, of refusing to love, of refusing to overlook their faults while we expect God (and perhaps others) to overlook ours...it is only as we choose to be merciful as He is merciful...it is only as we learn to give liberally and sacrificially as He gives liberally and sacrificially...that we will experience true spiritual liberation because it is only in being like Him that we will be restored to being what we were originally created to be: image-bearers of the One Who is merciful and compassionate and gracious and good and kind and generous to all.

And so, dearest brethren, as you reflect on our Lord's words to us today, and as you once more remember the ultimate demonstration of His amazing love for you in the portrayal of His sacrifice of Himself for you in the Eucharistic Feast, ask Him to help you see His heart...to see His mercy and compassion for you personally. And then ask Him to help you reflect what He reveals to you in the way you relate to others, so that your life as a follower of Jesus may show both the vertical and horizontal elements of our faith.