

keep your accounts in order

The Rev. Bernard J. Owens/Homily for September 17, 2017

The news from Florida and Texas is heartbreaking, and yet we can see goodness there. We have seen in the past weeks acts of selfless care for people in need, where it simply didn't matter to anyone who was doing the saving and who was being saved. We learned that when a storm hits Texans show up with pickup trucks and Cajuns show up in boats, and together pull everyone from the water they can find. When Irma bore down on Florida, homes up and down the eastern seaboard were opened for Floridians to seek shelter. We have remembered that we are our brother's keeper.

To be a Christian, though, means that we don't wait until a natural disaster to show this kind of self-giving care for our neighbors. Jesus teaches us to love our neighbor as ourselves, knowing that one member of the body is cannot thrive if another is diminished. In this, we are profoundly accountable to one another.

The Christian life is characterized by a radical accountability – to one another in the church, and to God. Even before we call it radical, accountability is a powerful concept when we really think about it. It means that our *accounts* must be in proper order. We must pay what we owe. We must not take out loans that we know we can never pay. We must pay workers what they earn. That's accountability. But as followers of Jesus, we go further. We live lives of *radical* accountability. Through forgiveness and humility and love, we learn instead to unburden ourselves of our worldly accounts – our list of things owed to us and things we owe to others – so that we can be free to love.

I've been thinking a lot lately of the line from the Lord's Prayer: *Give us this day our daily bread*. There's a lot of meaning in there. May we have enough to eat, and trust God that will provide our needs. May we have the bread of life – bread of the Word, through study and prayer and worship – so that our hearts may be nourished. But when I think about our accountability to one another, this phrase takes on new meaning. *Give us this day our daily bread*.

Trusting God to give us our daily bread today means living profoundly in the present, and not relying on all those little accounts that we know will be there for us tomorrow. Relying on daily bread given by God means that we aren't thinking about that stockpile of favors, or leverage, or even the wealth that we hold onto to make sure we can get what we need...tomorrow.

We are free to taste the goodness of daily bread when we've spent our lives leading up to this day practicing radical accountability. When we've cultivated forgiveness, when we've learned that holding a note over someone else – and

though I'm using money as a metaphor here, we all know what it's like to have something lorded over us – we've learned that holding an account where *we are owed* something gives us a false sense of security for tomorrow while robbing us of our daily bread, today. *Give us this day our daily bread* envisions living each day with our accounts in proper order.

The meaning of daily bread is deepened by the next line: *Forgive us our sin, as we forgive sins*. Or trespasses, if you want to speak King James English, or debts, if you want to be Presbyterian for a day. Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. I may like the Presbyterian interpretation more than our own, because it gets at this idea of radical accountability. God forgives our debts, and we refuse to hold onto debts owed to us, because we know that a web of indebtedness puts daily bread out of reach.

Forgiveness is what makes this possible. We see in the parable of the wicked slave that God models the perfect forgiveness that allows us to properly settle our accounts. The slave owes his King a sum of money, but when he cannot pay it, he falls on his knees and begs mercy. And the King forgives him the debt: radical accountability means being ready to wipe the slate clean. Not one time, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. An absurd and audacious number of times. The Kingdom of God has the best banks ever, and none of them are solvent. And yet they hold a treasure far richer than 10 thousand talents.

We all need forgiveness. We've done things that hang heavy on our hearts. We've said things that we cannot un-say. We've even thought things that haven't yet reach the surface of awareness, where we could see them for the hurtful things that they are. We need forgiveness, and that is exactly what God gives us.

And when we are the ones doing the forgiving, we too gain our freedom. Forgiveness means we don't get to hold on to that thing that is eating away at our relationship, we let it go. Seventy times, we let it go. We let it go for us, and we let it go to share the gift that God has given us.

That doesn't mean that we let ourselves get hurt repeatedly, or suffer abuse. Forgiveness means though that we don't let our hearts become trapped in someone else's dark jail cell. Forgiveness is about freedom, and it's one of God's greatest gifts of empowerment.

Of course, the slave is forgiven, but what does he do? He then turns to someone who owes *him* money and demands payment. He'd been given the good news of total forgiveness, then slinked around to open a new account.

The Christian life calls for a radical accountability to God, and to one another. As God forgives us, we must forgive one another. You all know what a *chit* is, right? It's a little note, a voucher, that records a sum owed. We don't want to hold on

to these, but if we are honest with ourselves, do we stockpile them? But those are nothing more than debts that haven't been forgiven, and they will stand in the way of daily bread. Trust me...you don't want that chit!

This is not just about forgiveness, though. Radical accountability means living in faithful community without holding any sense of power over one another. This means we don't get to lord anything over anyone, for the simple reason that there is only one Lord.

In Paul's letter to the Romans, he notes that there are some believers who are vegetarian, and they believe this is essential to the faith. Well, are they right? And if they are, are they better Christians? And if they're wrong, are worse? (Paul uses the words *strong* and *weak* here).

Some of these folks feel that certain practices are essential to being a follower of Jesus. But while Paul suggests that they are a bit mistaken, there's a much deeper point to be made. He suggests that those who rely on practices are *weak in faith*, and that those who aren't worried about that stuff are *strong* in the faith. Yet this isn't a value judgment: those practices are sacred if done to honor Jesus, even if they aren't necessary.

But that's not the point. The point in Paul's eyes is a sense of welcome that brings us back to radical accountability. Sure, he says, there are those who are strong in the faith and those who are weak. Yet, he says, *the strong must welcome the weak, and the weak must welcome the strong, for God has welcomed all of us*. Do you see it? Nothing is lorded over another, because there is one lord. There are no imbalances, no chits, and no judgment of the fact that we're all on different stages of our walk with Jesus, and that that walk will take different forms. All of it is part of the Body of Christ, for we are all one in Jesus.

Since we're talking about stewardship this month, I also see our financial giving as a part of this same radical accountability. We give not simply because we know there's a need; we give because it allows us to experience the daily bread of God's presence. Giving – and as Christians we are called to give a meaningful proportion of what we have – helps put our accounts in order. It means that our accounts follow our accountability, because it means structuring our whole lives around the love of God and our fidelity to our brothers and sisters.

Give us this day our daily bread. Good accounting means keeping good track of our ledgers. But radical accountability means something so much more: it means letting the forgiveness and grace of God shape our lives so that we can truly settle all our accounts. When we hold onto a stack of chits, of things owed and things we owe, we become mired in the past and fixated on getting paid back tomorrow.

But neither gives us a taste of the living God. Our daily bread is here today, and we are as free as we wish to be to let it nourish us.

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