

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel:

The word of the LORD came to me: Son of man, you live in the midst of a rebellious house; they have eyes to see but do not see, and ears to hear but do not hear, for they are a rebellious house. Now, son of man, during the day while they are looking on, prepare your baggage as though for exile, and again while they are looking on, migrate from where you live to another place; perhaps they will see that they are a rebellious house. You shall bring out your baggage like an exile in the daytime while they are looking on; in the evening, again while they are looking on, you shall go out like one of those driven into exile; while they look on, dig a hole in the wall and pass through it; while they look on, shoulder the burden and set out in the darkness; cover your face that you may not see the land, for I have made you a sign for the house of Israel. I did as I was told. During the day I brought out my baggage as though it were that of an exile, and at evening I dug a hole through the wall with my hand and, while they looked on, set out in the darkness, shouldering my burden. Then, in the morning, the word of the LORD came to me: Son of man, did not the house of Israel, that rebellious house, ask you what you were doing? Tell them: Thus says the Lord GOD: This oracle concerns Jerusalem and the whole house of Israel within it. I am a sign for you: as I have done, so shall it be done to them; as captives they shall go into exile. The prince who is among them shall shoulder his burden and set out in darkness, going through a hole he has dug out in the wall, and covering his face lest he be seen by anyone.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 78:56-57, 58-59, 61-62

Do not forget the works of the Lord!

They tempted and rebelled against God the Most High, and kept not his decrees. They turned back and were faithless like their fathers; they recoiled like a treacherous bow.

Do not forget the works of the Lord!

They angered him with their high places and with their idols roused his jealousy. God heard and was enraged and utterly rejected Israel.

Do not forget the works of the Lord!

And he surrendered his strength into captivity, his glory in the hands of the foe. He abandoned his people to the sword and was enraged against his inheritance.

Do not forget the works of the Lord!

Gospel:

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew 18:21–19:1

Peter approached Jesus and asked him, "Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus answered, "I say to you, not seven times but seventy-seven times. That is why the Kingdom of heaven may be likened to a king who decided to settle accounts with his servants. When he began the accounting, a debtor was brought before him who owed him a huge amount. Since he had no way of paying it back, his master ordered him to be sold, along with his wife, his children, and all his property, in payment of the debt. At that, the servant fell down, did him homage, and said, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back in full.' Moved with compassion the master of that servant let him go and forgave him the loan. When that servant had left, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a much smaller amount. He seized him and started to choke him, demanding, 'Pay back what you owe.' Falling to his knees, his fellow servant begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' But he refused. Instead, he had the fellow servant put in prison until he paid back the debt. Now when his fellow servants saw what had happened, they were deeply disturbed, and went to their master and reported the whole affair. His master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you your entire debt because you begged me

to. Should you not have had pity on your fellow servant, as I had pity on you?' Then in anger his master handed him over to the torturers until he should pay back the whole debt. So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives his brother from his heart." When Jesus finished these words, he left Galilee and went to the district of Judea across the Jordan.

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for the 19th Thursday of the Year

I have read this passage every other year since 1978. I have always found Ezekiel's behavior a bit odd. So this time I did some more research. He was reenacting a past event. Ezekiel was living in exile, along with the rest of Jerusalem's inhabitants, after the siege and destruction of Jerusalem. King Zedekiah attempted to escape capture by digging through Jerusalem's walls. He escaped into the midst of the Babylonian captors, was blinded and led away into captivity. This event would have been known to Ezekiel's Jewish neighbors. However they, like me, had a difficult time getting the prophet's point.

The Babylonian Captivity lasted seventy years and spanned several generations. The people had hoped that it would be over soon, but Ezekiel labeled them as rebellious against God as were the king and inhabitants of Jerusalem. They still had a way to go, in the prophet's eyes, before God was ready to forgive them. I find this most interesting because God's people in Diaspora remained so faithful to God and made their obscure faith into a major world religion. Without the Babylonians, their faith in God would remain a tribal religion in Palestine. They actually brought their faith in God into a wider world.

Whether or not Ezekiel's behavior made sense to his neighbors is of little importance. We read these words today from the book in the bible that bears his name. His actions can also speak to us. Each of us may ask how well we see and hear God's word. God's presence is all around, within and between us. We can all recognize God more deeply. As it was in Ezekiel's time, God is a mere thought away. All we need do is notice.

This is one of the scariest gospels I have ever read. The story plays out like this. God has forgiven us of all our sins. Through Jesus death, God ransomed us from our fate. Nothing anyone can do to us is as bad as a lifetime of sin. Through forgiveness, God relieved us of our debt. If we do not forgive others, Jesus tells us that we risk God holding us to our debt for sin; eternal damnation. Sometimes we don't understand what forgiveness means. When God forgives us, what does God do? God doesn't excuse us. God doesn't tell us what we have done wrong is now right. He releases us from a debt that we owe to God.

When we forgive someone else, we don't make their wrong right either. We release our hurt, anger and desire for revenge into the loving arms of God. Forgiving never frees another, forgiveness frees us to heal. Only God can forgive and forget; a perk of God being perfect love. Sometimes we cannot forget. That may be a good thing; for sometimes it's better to avoid those who can hurt us again. Forgiveness is also the first step to reconciliation with others. Reconciliation happens when we can say, "I'm sorry," and, "I forgive you," to each other. With reconciliation, people can move into more intimacy with others.

Ezekiel's actions invited the wider community to reflect on his and their behavior. All of us can discern more deeply God's loving call and presence. Jesus' parable can sound as a threat to

those of us who find forgiving another a challenging task. It is instead an invitation to rely on the infinite, eternal and unconditional love when we reach the limits of our own love. As God shares love by forgiving us, we can share God's love with others. We can see God's face and hear God's voice in all those we meet.

May God who forgives us help us to forgive one another.

James D. Beath
August 11, 2022