

Homily - February 4, 2024 – Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time



As always, a little bit of context might help us enter into these Scripture readings. In the Mediterranean world, the world where Jesus walked the earth, the world where all our books of the Bible emerged from---in that world every gift carried the expectation of a gift in return.

However, don't think of it as a tit-for-tat world where you only return a favor to those who have shown you favor, or where you only love those who have shown you love. Don't think that way. Although we don't live in the Mediterranean culture during Biblical times, we call this in our culture: "paying it forward." Pay it forward is an expression for when the recipient of an act of kindness does something kind for someone else rather than simply accepting or repaying the original good deed. In other words, it was never good enough, in the culture of that time, to simply say, "thank-you" or to return the favor to someone who showed you favor. You felt obligated to spread the good you received to others. Jesus says as much when he said, ***"What you have freely received, freely give"*** (Mt. 10:8). It may be his way of saying, "Pay it forward." We cannot repay our parents the gift of life and the love they gave us, nor do they expect us to. All a good parent wants of us is for us to pass on to the next generation the love we ourselves received from them.

For as long as I can remember, every time someone did something good for me, I've always had, and still have, the urge to do 10 good things for them. I just want to. That's not paying it forward; that's paying it back. For example, you give me a box of chocolates for Christmas; I feel like giving you 10 boxes in return. However, the very moment I chomp into the first chocolate, and savor the sweet taste in my mouth, all thoughts of giving you those 10 boxes of chocolate vanishes faster than grease lightning. In fact, I'm so engrossed in the moment, I don't even think of you

at all—only my next chocolate fix. (I told you I was a priest; I never told you I was a good one). The people of Biblical times, including and especially Jesus, weren't like me. What Jesus freely received, he freely gave. At the Last Supper he said, ***"I call you my friends, because everything I have received from my Father, I have given to you"*** (Jn. 15:15).

The key is that we learn to both receive and give freely! It has to be done freely. St. Paul, in that second reading, speaks about freedom and slavery in the same paragraph. He wrote, ***"I make the Gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my rights...For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them."*** He is telling us that he is fine, absolutely fine, with being a slave to anyone if it helps people to know the freeing power of the Gospel. Most of us cannot put freedom and slavery together in the same sentence; Paul can. It reminds me of Fr. Eugene King, who was the rector of St. Paul's Seminary in Ottawa when I studied there over 30 years ago. He was told by a conceited young man, "I don't need to be obedient to God or to go to church like you and so many others do. I'm free and you aren't." This young man was paraphrasing Karl Marx, the atheist philosopher who said that religion was simply "the opium of the masses." In other words, religion's only purpose is to alleviate people's suffering and provide them with pleasant illusions. Fr. King's response to this young man was, "Being obedient to God is the most freeing thing that can happen to me."

So, when St. Paul says that he is willing to become a slave in order to introduce people to the freedom that the Gospel, and the Gospel alone, can give, I think he's saying something very profound to us. For Paul becoming a slave is the equivalent of a discipline. If an elite athlete (and I'm not talking about your Wednesday night "beer" hockey league) wants to pursue their ultimate goal in life, they have to be disciplined. They almost become a "slave" to eating well, practicing every day, and being disciplined enough to say "no" to anyone and anything that's not going to help them reach their goal. When they are following their passion, with lots of discipline, they never feel freer. I admire people who are so disciplined and so free

at the same time. They have received a gift, they honed that gift with lots of discipline and sacrifice—like a slave—and they freely offer that gift to others.

I think that's what's going on in the gospel account of the healing of Peter's mother-in-law. She was seriously sick. She could not heal herself. She had to freely receive Jesus' touch. Jesus freely gave, and she freely received. The fever leaves her and she responds by paying it forward—she began to serve them.

Life isn't about returning the favor that you have received to the person who did you a good turn in the first place. It's about realizing, with gratitude, all that God has placed in your hands in the first place. Then it's about placing goodness in the hands of others.

An example, that's better than the box of chocolate example. One of the best books I've ever read was Mitch Albom's book entitled Tuesdays with Morrie. It was a bestseller. Although the book was written in 1997, I only got around to reading it in 2002. The book is somewhat autobiographical. Mitch Albom doesn't tell his entire life story, only an important slice. He hops the train every Tuesday for 14 weeks in a row to go visit his now-retired sociology professor, Morrie Schwartz, who is dying of Lou Gehrig's disease in Detroit. With each visit, the dying professor, Morrie, drops a pearl of wisdom on Mitch's lap that he ponders while he is returning home on the train. These pearls of wisdom are final life lessons and form the basis of his book, Tuesdays with Morrie.

Like I said, I only got around to reading the book in 2002, five years after it was published. As I'm reading the book, my mother is dying back in the Ottawa Valley. Living in Sackville and being responsible for four churches, I wasn't able to make the 1100 km trek to Ottawa as often as I would have liked to. However, there was a bachelor, a parishioner, at the Sackville Memorial Hospital named Alex MacDonald who also was dying. His only living relative was a brother who lived in British Columbia, and they weren't talking to each other. So, every Wednesday, since I couldn't be with my mother, I spent time with Alex. It wasn't "Tuesdays with Morrie" but "Wednesdays with Alex." Like Morrie, Alex would always drop a

pearl of wisdom on my lap that would sustain me until I visited him the next Wednesday. He knew my mother was dying, and he always asked about her and never directed the attention on himself nor his own struggles. Each time before I would drive off to Ottawa to visit my mother, he would say, "I'm praying for her. If I'm not here when you get back, I'll see you on the other side of the river." He died, while I was Ottawa, on the same day my mother did. What I couldn't be for her, I hope I was for Alex. I couldn't pay it back to my mother, but I could pay it forward to Alex.

Peter's mother-in-law didn't take out her wallet and pay Jesus for restoring her health. She paid it forward and began to serve everyone in the room.

What you have freely received, freely give.

~Fr. Phil