

We have incredibly rich readings this morning and each of them has something to tell us about how we are meant to live together in community.

Let's start with Paul's letter to the Romans. This was a community of believers in disarray. The Roman Empire had exiled Jewish believers leaving Gentile converts to make up the majority of the community. Paul's letter is as much a theological treatise as it is a letter with political and ethnoracial implications for a community that is trying to knit itself together through radical welcome as the Jewish members returned when the emperor changed.

Radical welcome of all is meant to be a hallmark of any Christian community often made up of diverse groups of people. Jesus welcomed all, and we, as Christians are meant to as well.

In this section of Paul's letter, we have some of the most familiar phrases pointing to this radical welcome at a time when petty squabbles between "competing" factions was prevalent; all reminding them, and us, that ultimately, we belong to Christ, to God, alone, and all together at the same time. And it is God, alone, that sits on the great judgment seat and it is God alone that will judge right and wrong, the conflict over which so many disagreements hinge, standing in the way of true reconciliation, when we usurp God's role.

Leave judgement to God and welcome all into the fold. This is one way we are called to live together in community.

Our Old Testament lesson is the conclusion of the lengthy Joseph saga found in the book of Genesis. Joseph, the youngest son of Jacob, had been sold into slavery, exiled into Egypt, by his jealous brothers. In Egypt, Joseph became a favorite of Pharaoh and found himself in charge of the many stores of grain grown in the bread basket of the Nile.

When famine arose and spread to Israel, Joseph's brothers traveled to Egypt in search of grain to feed their families. It had been years since they had seen Joseph at the point where the saga picks up this morning. Once they recognize Joseph they are filled with fear at the possibility of his retribution. They beg for forgiveness and Joseph, refusing to take the place of God and judge them, does forgive them, reassures and provides for their needs.

And then he introduces the theological construct of divine providence with these words, "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as [God] is doing today."

I want to be clear about two things before I continue. God does not cause bad things to happen so God can somehow make things better. That is a misunderstanding of divine providence. Instead, God is with us in whatever life throws our way, always seeking the best for us out of God's unconditional love and mercy. Instead of saying, "When God closes a door, God opens a window," it would be more accurate to say, "When life closes a door, God opens a window." God in control and God as cause are not the same thing.

Also, forgiveness is hard. And forgiveness is not the same as forgetting. Our loving and gracious God would never expect us to forgive an abuser and then go back for more abuse. Forgiving strengthens us and our community – forgetting so that sinful behavior can continue does not.

Today's gospel picks up where we left off last week with Peter asking, not if we must forgive, but how often. This feels like a typical Peter question, another setting his mind on human, not divine, things. After all, Jesus has taught the disciples, and us, to pray with these words, "forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." Do we want God to quantify the number of times our sins are forgiven, or do we want infinite mercy and forgiveness for all the ways we break relationship with God and each other? Do we want, always, the possibility of reconciliation when we fall short of God's expectations for us?

We are entering a stretch of parables, short teachings with a moral lesson, used by Jesus to help us learn to live together, faithfully, with God and with each other. Because of their first century context, some are more confusing than others. This one, commonly known as the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, is pretty clear. Forgiven his own huge debt by his master, the servant then refuses to forgive a much smaller debt by a fellow worker.

Clearly, Jesus asks, if God is willing to forgive the countless sins of humanity how much more should we humans forgive the lesser amount of sin that we encounter in our own personal circumstances – remembering again – forgiveness is not the same as forgetting.

Jesus begins this, and many, parables with this phrase, "the kingdom of God is like." Each of today's lessons speaks to ways in which we are to live together, well and whole, in community, and the kingdom of God is the ultimate community to which we aspire. It is a kingdom full of radical welcome for all including the exile. It is a community that withholds judgement, because it understands that judgement belongs to God alone. It is a community that forgives those who are repentant, because that is how God forgives. It is a community that loves God and loves neighbor indiscriminately. It is the community we hope to live in someday, even as we strive to live into it now. It is a matter of choice, and God has given us all the freedom to choose.

God created us in God's image, called us good, and wants all good for us. Will we choose to welcome, to include, to withhold judgement, to forgive and be reconciled, because "your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."