

## Prayer

In a movie a few years ago, *The Upside of Anger*, starring Joan Allen and Kevin Costner is significant not only because of its surprise ending, but also because it relates to our parable today in our gospel reading. Joan Allen plays the role of Terry, an angry housewife, with four daughters who is angry that her husband has run off with his secretary to live in Sweden. As the plot unfolds, the viewer becomes involved in her relationships with her four daughters, all complicated and dysfunctional because of the rage that she holds against her former husband. She takes some satisfaction in finally hearing at least some of her daughters talk about how much they hated their father, too. The story gets more complicated as she becomes involved with Denny, a neighbor, who finally moves in with her and the girls, and who also experiences her anger.

Most reviews of this film analyzed the mother-daughter relationships, or the relationship between Terry and Denny. However, there is another part of the story that isn't just about the messy details of the movie. Just like a parable, sometimes you really don't know what ya' got until you get to the end.

If you haven't seen the movie, I apologize for giving the ending away, but at least it's not a current film. At the end of the movie, Denny, who is exploring the acreage in the back of the house that is going to be turned into a new subdivision, is there when something is discovered. The workers uncover an old well and in the well, they find the body of Terry's husband. He fell through the well while walking the dog and never ran away with the secretary. The movie never really answers whether the husband was really having an affair with the secretary. What happened was that Terry made a choice – she decided that her husband had abandoned her and the girls and she lived a life of anger and abandonment – falling into a lifestyle of alcoholism and jealous rage. She almost ruined her life and the life of her daughters because of her choices. The story comes to its gradual end with Terry weeping over her folly, over her real loss of living a life based on the stupidity of her anger. She had made the choice to live in a world of anger and the ending of the movie asks the viewer to consider how such errors are like their own.

In today's parable the main character in the story also makes a poor choice, which brings him to a dead end. He finds himself in debt to his master with no means to pay off the debt. He knew this world of indebtedness very well. Sometimes people spend too much, lose their perspective on what's really important in life and squander what resources they have on unimportant things. Sometimes, it's having to make choices with limited resources. Whatever the situation with this particular servant, he knew how things worked in a world of debt. When you can't pay, you have to renegotiate or you end up in debtor's prison. So he asked for some kind of a deal, any deal, so that he could finally do the only thing he knew how to do – pay the debt he owed.

The master, however, surprised him by opening the door to a world about which he knew nothing. He introduced him to a debt-free world, a world in which debts could be forgiven. He told the servant he would have to pay nothing. Of course, Jesus is here introducing his hearers to the world of God's mercy. It is a world in which people don't have to do anything to earn or

deserve God's affirming love. God gives because God's love is extravagant. Understanding what this means and choosing to live within such a world is a major change. Whether we can respond in the same way or in the way of the forgiven servant is whether we live in God's world or the world of indebtedness.

The servant goes out and finds someone who is indebted to him. He tells him to pay up, and when he can't, he has him thrown into jail. The other servant reports this and the tables are turned for the servant who accepted so freely the master's forgiveness, but who himself couldn't forgive others. He himself gets to experience the same lifestyle which he can't seem to let go. Jesus is saying to his hearers, there is a lifestyle which deals with debts and indebtedness, and there is another in which debts are not an issue because forgiveness in that lifestyle sets you free.

Surprising as it is, you have a choice – to live in one or the other. In the parable that Jesus tells, the unforgiving servant chooses to go back to the only world that he knows best, the one ruled by debts.

This is a hard parable if we get caught up in all of the messy details and start to wonder what role God is in and who he represents. But these are just the details along the way. Once again, this is more about how we live together with one another. The parable shows that all of us fail to be as forgiving and filled with mercy as God – yet we can still choose to live differently, to live through the mercy God gives to us. The servant in the parable made his choice, to live in the world of debt and that becomes a dead end street.

There's a certain artist that creates computer generated works. When you look at one from a distance you get closer, you see a cross imposed on a gray field, but the details are not clear. Then, when you get an inch away from the picture, you can see that the phrase "70x7" is written hundreds of times to make up the cross in the picture. There is a surprise when you look at it in a new way. There is a surprise in the words of Jesus as well. It's not about debt and bondage, but about freedom and forgiveness.

We can be tied so greatly to a world of debt. We see it all around us in the wake of tragedy and destruction and what world people live in. As awful as it is to lose everything, somehow people are able to live in freedom, knowing that what they've lost is not the same as gaining blessings in God.

In a world of debt, it is about a world of blame. Who's to blame for what happens? We want to know who to blame. Of course we do have to hold people accountable for their actions, but it doesn't mean that we can't live within a new dimension that Jesus introduces. In a world of debt, we would expect that Jesus would have cried from the cross to find out whom to blame – "Who is responsible for this? The Romans? The Jews? The Pharisees? The people who stood by watching and said nothing? My Father in heaven?"

Instead, Jesus cried from the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Being a Christian involves a daily choice of living in the dead end world of debt or the new possibility that Christ gives to us. Jesus' world is a world where he took on the blame and

harshness and revenge upon himself so that we can live in a world of forgiveness and freedom. It's a surprise; he did this to rid us of hate and debt so that there would be a new life of possibility.

How will you live your life? Do you know that you are given a life of freedom or do you fall back into the world of debt and bondage?

(idea and portions of sermon from Prof. Dr. David Zersen, President Emeritus on Concordia University at Austin, TX)