

Here we are on the first Sunday in Lent. It hardly seems that we can be here already. But it is good news. We know that soon, spring will be here. Warmer days. Flowers will start to bloom. Life will soon encompass us.

But what else do we know? I remember talking with a friend in college about Lent and Easter. And he told me that he didn't get it. There were so many points that he didn't understand. He knew the end and that was that he really cared about. He just wanted his chocolate bunny.

Lent officially starts with Ash Wednesday. We are reminded that we come from dust and we will return to dust. Then we have some time off until Palm Sunday and then Holy Week. But, during this time, we are supposed to have given something up. We are to make a sacrifice so that we can anticipate its return.

But, what do you give up? How many times have you heard someone say that they stopped giving something up for Lent for Lent? I've said it. I never made it to Easter, giving up something. Most of the people I knew didn't make it, unless they gave up something meaningless or unavailable.

We seem to forget about the symbolism of the 40 days during Lent. And it's easy to do. Easter and Lent aren't like Advent and Christmas. You don't have constant reminders throughout the entire holiday season. With today's commercial standards, Easter is off the shelf before St. Patty's Day and Graduation and the Fourth of July are out. All of a sudden, Palm Sunday and Holy Week are upon you and you don't know how that happened.

During this time we are supposed to be preparing ourselves for the kingdom of heaven. Jesus is teaching us what we need to do to obtain our place with God. He has told us that he is going to die for our sins. We will be baptized with his ascension. But, we must accept God and live as righteous as we can.

Today's reading from Matthew is about Forgiveness. Jesus is telling us that we need to forgive one and another. Then God will judge us and not forgive our actions against them. And it's true. I was told the other day by someone I deeply respect, that we have to forgive with our heart or it will just eat at us. And he is right.

Back in my bartending days, I had a friend that I spent a lot of time with. We would hang out after work on a regular basis. At first it was pretty low key, we would go to the bar and throw some darts or watch a game. The more time that we spent together, however, the more our relationship changed.

At first he would ask to borrow a couple of dollars to cover his tab. He always had an excuse. He forgot his debit card and thought he made more in cash tips than he did. Or he would say something else along those lines. And he would repay me within a day or two.

Then he started borrowing more money. He needed gas money so he could pick up his son for the weekend. He needed money for rent or utilities. And I never saw that money again.

But it wasn't just that he wouldn't pay me back. We would go out and he would be wearing new sneakers. Or he would have a new leather jacket. Or he would buy a new video game. And each time, he would say that once we got paid, he would give me his check.

Now, I don't know how many of you have worked as a server before. But you don't really get paychecks. A good paycheck for me back then was around \$15. Since you get tips, most of the time your entire check goes to taxes. So, I never saw any money from his paychecks.

This was way back when I had just started dating Alyssa. And we were starting to make plans to be together. I was saving every penny I could so that we could get our own place together and I could buy her a ring. If I had just a portion of the money that my friend owed me, the amount would have helped out tremendously.

I'm sure that most of you have a friend like that. That friend that tells you whatever they think you want to hear. They are your best friend as long as it benefits them. But, the second that you ask them for whatever they owe you or you ask them to help you in some way, POOF!, they're gone. That's what this friend did to me.

I asked him for my money back. And he didn't have it. We talked about why I needed it. But, it didn't matter. He was never going to give me the money. He had excuse after excuse on why he didn't have my money. Eventually I told him to forget it and I moved on. Or so I thought.

I knew that I was never going to see that money again. And I loaned him some more money a couple times, expecting to never get that money back. But I felt there was a fire in my chest whenever we would talk about money. And one night we were at the bar and he jumped another server who owed him money. And that was when I realized that I hadn't really forgiven him.

This is much like our reading in Matthew. In Jesus' parable, a slave owes a king a great amount of money. In translation it would take the slave over 100,000 years to pay off his debt. Now, my friend didn't owe me that much, but whenever you don't have much, any amount seems like a lot. And like the king, I forgave his debt.

My friend, however, behaved very much like the slave. He told me what he thought I wanted to hear so that I would take pity on him, similar to the king and the slave. And like the slave, when someone owed him, he went crazy and demanded it immediately.

When I saw this, it immediately angered me. First, I was trying to figure out where he got the money to loan to this other guy. Second, I realized what the burning was. I knew why I was upset. Because I never truly forgave him. I forgave his debt, but I never forgave him for being himself.

My friend was never going to change. If he was lucky, he would realize what he was doing before he got into serious trouble. Like Jesus said, I kept forgiving him each time he did myself or someone else wrong. But, I didn't accept and forgive him for who he was.

One night, a group of us went out. Like Jesus says at the beginning of today's scripture reading, I went and spoke with him one on one about my grievances. There was no resolution, so I grabbed Alyssa and another friend and we sat down together. Again, he didn't listen, he didn't see that anything he had done was wrong. And honestly, I don't think he cared.

So, I took Jesus' next step and spoke to him in front of a large group of our friends. I realize that Jesus' example is about the church. Comparing then and now, I believe that the church can be expanded.

In Jesus' time and particularly with whom he was speaking, their interactions would be with fellow church members more often than not. If a Jew had an opportunity with a Roman or a Samaritan, it wouldn't matter because their interactions would be minimal. But, if you fought with another Jew, you would see each other much more frequently and intimately.

In today's world, especially with social media, we can't get away from people. Whether it is in the church physically or in the social media world, we will continue to see them on a regular

basis. That is unless we block or unfriend them. So, we need to forgive beyond just the people in the church.

We all shared our grievances. He had wronged almost everyone in our group. And we had each forgiven his actions, but we couldn't forgive him for being him. The conversation ended with him aggressively leaving the bar. And that brought some closure to us and helped us forgive him.

I treated him like a Gentile or a tax-collector as Jesus said. When I say that, what I mean is that I still spoke with him and we would occasionally go out. But, I didn't let him into my church. He chose to keep that barrier between us. His behavior pushed me away. I knew that given the chance he would try to take money off of me or worse. And he did try, and I forgave him for trying.

And that is what we need to do, we need to forgive. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, people will always hurt us. The question is how much we let them hurt us. We can hold on to that hate and let it fester and eat at us. And that keeps us from living a righteous life and being accepted by God's grace. Only when we forgive are we truly free.

Forgiving God, as you encouraged your people to forgive, you modeled forgiveness by releasing us from our bondage to sin. Help us to forgive others, so that we might live in harmony with all your children. We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.