

*The Merchant of Venice* is a play written by William Shakespeare in 1596.

The protagonist, Antonio, is a merchant ... not surprisingly ... who lives in the city-state of Venice. Antonio is approached by his friend Bassanio for a loan. And although Antonio is a wealthy merchant ... at least as far as ships and merchandise are concerned ... he is cash-poor - that is, not having liquid assets readily available to offer his friend. Nonetheless, Antonio agrees to provide collateral for his friend's loan - provided Bassanio can find someone willing to loan him the money.

And Bassanio does find someone - the character Shylock - who is, what we would call today - a "loan shark." Shylock is not fond of the merchant Antonio, and to show his dislike, demands as collateral on the loan ... "a pound of flesh."

The play continues with tragedy striking Antonio in his business ... his ships and their valuable cargo are lost at sea. And when Antonio is taken to court by Shylock ... the "loan shark" demands receipt of his collateral ... a pound of Antonio's flesh. His desire for revenge - according to the letter of the agreement - is so intense ... that even when Bassanio comes to the rescue and offers twice the amount of cash as repayment on the loan, Shylock presses his gruesome demand.

The English language figure of speech ... "a pound of flesh" ... has come to mean ... "a payment or penalty exacted to fulfill a deal or punishment" ... at least according to Merriam-Webster ... and usually implies ... that the payment is unreasonable or misguided or ruthless.

In today's readings, we hear in all three readings ... and the Psalm as well ... multiple times about God's mercy.

In the First Reading, we hear of God's mercy in dealing with His people Israel - who only shortly after receiving the 10 Commandments, have gone off and violated the first one ... by worshipping the Golden Calf.

In the second reading, we hear St. Paul recount to Timothy how God treated Paul with mercy - not only redeeming him in Christ ... despite his

persecution of Christians ... but also by raising him up an Apostle of Christ's Gospel ... as an example of the magnitude of God's mercy.

And in the Gospel, we hear the familiar parable of the Prodigal Son. When the younger son returns, he doesn't expect mercy. Rather, he's quite willing to pay his pound of flesh and take up with his father's servants ... just so long as he doesn't have to go hungry anymore.

And the older son is not much better. In realizing the volume of mercy his father has shown to the younger brother, he expresses contempt.

My guess is that it is perhaps something in our human nature ... some aspect of our fallen state ... that we are more O.K. with exacting punishment ... or even with receiving punishment ... than we are with either giving mercy ... or even in being subjected to someone's mercy.

Maybe we feel the need for payback ... or to not owe anyone anything.

Yet God's mercy is far ... far ... beyond our comprehension. Not only do we choke at the thought of His being merciful to someone else ... but it would seem that we are also uncomfortable ... at times ... with being on the receiving end of such a tremendous onslaught of mercy.

Guilt and vengeance both blind us to God's gift of infinite mercy ... leaving us looking for something else ... as if God's love isn't enough.

Perhaps that is what the English poet, Alexander Pope, meant when he wrote "to err is human, to forgive divine."

As we approach this altar to receive the Sacred Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ ... let us pray for that we might ... first ... be open to God's mercy for ourselves. Knowing that He desires to be merciful, let us pray for the grace of true repentance ... and may His mercy transform us. And then, let us also pray that with His grace active in our hearts ... we might be examples of God's mercy ... to those around us ... to those we interact with daily ... and so be beacons of His mercy in our lives ... and in the world.