

Sunday September 17th, 2017
Proper 19

PRAYER: O God, you run to greet us even before we turn toward home. Even though we are constantly trying to flee from your presence, we never really succeed. When we crouch in the shadows, you are there. When we cower in the cold, you are there. When we pass through the fire, you are there. So, we call upon your name, O God, no matter where we are, for you are near. Help us this day to be alive to your presence. Amen.

WORDS OF ASSURANCE: As the Apostle Paul reminds us, let us live our lives in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel. As we focus our minds on the goodness of God we will have the assurance that in Christ Jesus we are forgiven.

STEWARDSHIP: God gives us tasks to perform and equips us with strengths and abilities beyond what we deserve. In Christ, we are called to faithfulness, to exercise obedience, and to be deliberate in our discipline. We come now offering God the results of our labours. May God bless and use them to further his work in Christ's name.

PASTORAL PRAYER: Eternal, God of ages, whose hand has guided all generations before us, we offer our deepest gratitude for our rich heritage. We recognize the value and grace inherited in the wisdom passed down to us that many of our forbearers did not possess. Yet, we also know that they were far from alone in the world, for they could rely on something far better than the wisdom of the ages. They could rely on the God of the ages. Thanks be to you, O God, for you did not abandon them in their search for life's meaning and purpose. And, thanks be to you, their search was not in vain. You gave them laws for their journey through the wilderness into a settled land. You sent prophets among them as they moved from the open country into crowded cities. Then, as science produced one revolution after another, you turned scientists into philosophers to warn us of the danger of pursuing progress without regard for purpose; of seeking wealth without respect for wisdom; of increasing power without concern for justice; and of improving technology without compassion for people.

You have taken great pains to warn us of the dangers facing us, but we have often ignored your warnings. You dispatched prophets and apostles to remind us of the connection between love for you and love for your children. You made them partners with us in the gospel of reconciliation, but we have preferred to honour ourselves. We have praised partnership with our lips, but practiced individualism in our lives. Deliver us from our contentious ways and ambitious habits. Restore our oneness with you that we might rediscover our oneness with our brothers and sisters in Christ and, indeed, with all creation.

We are truly sorry, O God, for the damage we have done your cause in the world. We have failed you and, as a consequence, we have also failed our brothers and sisters. For this betrayal of you, of them, and of ourselves, we humbly beg your forgiveness. We ask you to renew in us the joy of our salvation. Grant us a fresh vision of our neighbours and ourselves as creatures fashioned in your image. Then, dear God, send us forth to perfect that image.

BENEDICTION: Carry with you from this place a joyful remembrance of one another and a deep commitment to one another. You are partners in the gospel; therefore, hold one another in your hearts, even as you are held in God's.

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Matthew 18:21-35
“Paying It Forward.”

There was an elderly gentleman who was at the local post office, but was having a difficult time steadying his hand enough to address a postcard he wished to send to a friend. He asked a young man who also happened to be in the post office, if he would be so kind as to help him write out the address. The young man cheerfully agreed, and even offered to write a short note on the card for the elderly gentleman.

After the short note was dictated, the young man handed the postcard back to the old fellow. The elderly gentleman looked at the postcard, then handed it back to the young man, and asked, “Would you mind doing one more thing for me?” The young man had thoroughly enjoyed this act of kindness and answered, “Certainly, what else may I do for you?” The elderly gentleman replied, “At the end of the note could you add, ‘Please excuse me for the sloppy handwriting?’”

There is considerable truth to the old adage that “No good deed goes unpunished.” I am sure that all of us have on some occasion done what we thought was: the right thing, the best thing, the kind thing, or the generous thing, only to have it come back and bite us. Such an experience angers us, and more than likely makes us more reluctant to help another person, and especially gun shy to help the person who hurt us a second time.

It is very painful to do something you believe will better someone else’s life, only to see that they have squandered the help, or shown no level of gratitude for what you have offered. Perhaps this is what Peter had in mind when he asked Jesus about how many times he should forgive someone. Now we must give Peter some credit. He had at least picked up from listening to Jesus that forgiveness was a necessity. Peter just wanted to be practical in deciding what limits there were to this forgiveness.

I firmly believe that in suggesting seven, as an amount, Peter believed he was being generous. Seven is of course an important number in scripture, referring to fullness or perfection. The rabbis of Jesus’ day considered three, a sufficient number of times to forgive someone of the same sin. I should point out here that the subject of this question, and the resulting parable, has to do with forgiving someone who repents or asks to be forgiven. In the greater scheme of things, seven times seems very generous, doesn’t it?

We like to say, “Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me.” That’s really only twice, but to offer seven opportunities for someone to harm us, or take advantage of us before we say “enough is enough”, that’s very long suffering, isn’t it? So, imagine the absolute shock, when Jesus replies that seven isn’t enough; not even close, but rather seventy times seven or 490. I should point out that the number Jesus gives is really irrelevant.

The number is so high that frankly, you would lose count long before you got to 490. But again, the number is irrelevant. Jesus is making the point that keeping a score on how many times you have forgiven someone, reveals a cold calculating heart. If I tally up the injuries, and the benefits of my relationships, then my human interactions become transactions based on my own wants and desires, and not based on love.

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And if I keep an account of how many times I forgive someone; how sincere is my forgiveness and how pure is my heart? To drive the point home, Jesus launches into the familiar parable we read today, which he says reflects the way things will be in the Kingdom of Heaven. The parable begins with a king deciding to bring his accounts up to date with his servants who had borrowed or owed money to him.

I wonder if you have noticed how often Jesus uses the imagery of settling accounts when he speaks about the Kingdom of Heaven? The implication to the end times, and God's judgment of people is strongly implied all through this parable, and indeed this part of Matthew's gospel. And so the scene unfolds in the parable, a process in which each of those indebted to the king are being forced to come before the king to settle up.

We assume from the parable that everyone else has come to some arrangement to pay their debts, but one man's account was deeply in the red. He owed 10,000 talents or better reflected in today's terms, millions of dollars. Actually, the Greek word here for the amount of talents is myriad, meaning the amount was beyond calculation. There was no way he could ever pay this huge debt, but the king decides to recover as much as he can by selling the man, his wife and his children into slavery.

It sounds kind of like a bankruptcy sale where creditors get ten cents on the dollar, or some other greatly reduced return on their losses. This transaction would mean the end of life as the servant knows it. He will never have freedom again, and may never see his family again as they are sold out among different households. Intentionally in this parable, Jesus is making it clear that this man is in an absolutely hopeless situation.

There is no one left to bail him out. No court protection. No bail out loans. No rich family member to come to the rescue. No church benevolent funds. He is destitute. I should also point out that in Jesus' culture, he would also feel ashamed, defeated, and at the very end of his rope. He has but one option left to him, and he takes it. I have no illusion that the servant expected any positive result from his encounter with the king, but what else could he do?

In desperation, he throws himself down in front of the king, begging for more time to pay the debt. The reality though is that he will never be able to pay the debt. The servant knows it, the king knows it, and every one watching these events knows it. The man is grasping at straws, trying to buy some time perhaps. The king considering the man's fate takes pity on him, and not only lets him go back to his family, but forgives his huge debt.

The specter of prison, slavery, indebtedness, the fear and the loss he was facing: is all gone with one word from the king, because only the king can forgive the debt. Now listening to this parable, we might think, "Boy was he lucky." Can you imagine one day getting a phone call from your bank telling you that all your debts have been paid? No more mortgages, no more loans, and your accounts are all solvent.

How would you respond? Personally, I think I would be so excited I might want to celebrate. I might host a party; invite some friends and family over to enjoy my good fortune.

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In the parable however, Jesus says, that when the man left the king, in others words the moment he walked out the front door of the palace, he went and found a man who owed him some money. This debt was considerably smaller; a hundred denarii. Just for your next trivial pursuit game I'll tell you that a day's wages for workers in Jesus' day was one denarii. There were 6,000 denarii to one talent.

The first servant therefore had been forgiven a debt 600,000 times greater than what the second servant owed him. There is an obvious exaggeration of the higher amount to make Jesus' point. Jesus goes on to state that the first servant grabbed the second by the throat, meaning he was very aggressive and very angry. Please not that this aggressive approach was not at all what the first servant had experienced in the king's palace.

He demanded instant payment. His fellow servant fell down and asked for the same consideration that the king gave the first servant. So far so good but now the kicker. That first servant showed no mercy. He had the man arrested, and put in jail until the debt was paid. In other words, for 100 days' worth of wages he essentially took this poor man's life away. This turn of events is quite shocking, both to us and to those who listened to Jesus.

It's a stunning turn of events. Think about it. The first servant hadn't even gone home to tell his wife the good news, when he was out making life miserable for a fellow servant. It was as if the first servant had never been before the king. The forgiveness and mercy he experienced bounced right off him. Perhaps he believed he had got away with one, or maybe he took advantage of the king's kindness. He refused to follow the king's example, and his lack of character disturbed the rest of the servant community. Actually, it disturbs me and probably you as well.

The other servants knew what had happened in the palace. They recognized the tremendous act of grace that was offered to the servant with the huge debt. They expected a change in the forgiven servant's character. Remember, he went out the palace door, and straight to the other servant. The king's forgiveness should have motivated the servant to compassion, because he himself had experienced a level of grace few people had ever experienced.

This is a central point of Jesus teaching, is it not? "Blessed are those who are merciful for they shall receive mercy" (Matthew 5:7). The fact that the second servant got arrested for his unpaid debt brought other servants running back to the king. They were upset, and felt perhaps that the first servant had taken advantage of the King's mercy to now exploit another's misfortune.

As you heard, the king declares the man an evil or wicked servant; condemning him to prison until his debt is fully paid. The Greek word in verse 34 literally states that he was given over to the "torturers". Although torture was forbidden in Jewish jails, it was very common in Roman ones. Those in Roman prisons for debts were often tortured in an attempt to motivate their families to pay the debts sooner, or "redeem" them out of jail.

Of course, in this case, the debt is so large, no one in several lifetimes could pay it. The point of the parable is clear. Jesus is underlining that how we treat others will be the same way God treats us. It seems, even to the casual observer, that this reversal of fortune for the first servant is a just decision on the king's part.

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We might even cheer that the wicked unforgiving servant got his “just desserts”. We might even conclude that this is an informative little morality tale, but how soon we forget what prompted this parable. Remember Peter’s question, “How often should I forgive someone?” Then Jesus concludes his parable with these words, “That’s what my heavenly Father will do to you, if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters in your heart.”

Now Jesus makes the parable personal. Jesus moves beyond the parable to look right into our hearts and says, “Now what are you going to do about that debt you feel is owed to you? What are you going to do with that hurt you have been nursing all these years?”

When you leave this service this morning, having been met by the king in his throne room, what is the first thing you are going to do, or think about doing, when you walk out that door? It comes back to what I was referring to last week, in regards to our family resemblance. As God’s children, the Holy Spirit is constantly working in us to help us reflect our Father who art in heaven.

This relates to one definition of hypocrisy I found which reads, “Some people who say ‘Our Father’ on Sunday go around the rest of the week acting like orphans.” Receiving the grace and mercy of God is a glorious thing. When we experience the forgiving love of Christ, our heavy burden of life is lifted. Just like in the parable when the servant facing a settling of his million-dollar debt, we too can feel as if we have run out of options in life.

Our lives can get so messy, that we are left with no option, but to throw ourselves at God’s feet and beg his forgiveness. The good news is he picks us up, embraces us as his child, forgives our debts no matter how large, and set us free to live as we are meant to live. It is what we do with this gift of grace that Jesus is very concerned with in our passage today. Has God’s grace truly changed us, made us more Christ like?

Perhaps like me, you see: hurts, insults, injustices, and cheating against your person as sort of on a sliding scale. That the pain people cause us is really relative. Relative to the loss we feel, and relative maybe to the value we place on what we have lost. I am sure we all agree that breaking a china mug from the dollar store is far less a loss than breaking grandma’s Royal Dolton one of a kind tea cup from the 1800’s.

The pain others foist on us is directly related to the value of the thing injured. Such as the story Mark Buchanan tells in his book *Hidden in Plain Sight* (pg. 188-189). It is a story I have heard in a variety of places and yet it never ceases to speak to me.

There was a woman whose only son was killed. She was consumed with: grief and hate and bitterness. “God,” she prayed, “Reveal my son’s killer.” One night she dreamed she was going to heaven. But there was a complication: in order to get to heaven, she had to pass through a certain house. She had to walk down the street, enter the house through the front door, go through its rooms, up the stairs, and exit the back door.

She asked God whose house this was. “It’s the house”, God told her, “of your son’s killer”. The road to heaven passed through the house of her enemy.

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Two nights later, there was a knock at her door. She opened it, and there stood a young man. He was about her son's age. "Yes?" she said. He hesitated. And then he said, "I am the one who killed your son. Since that day, I have had no life. No Peace. So here I am. I am placing my life in your hands. Kill me. I am dead already. Throw me in jail. I am in prison already. Torture me. I am in torment already. Do with me as you wish." Now let us pause for a moment to consider, what we would do in her place?

The woman in the story had prayed for this day. Now it had arrived, and she didn't know what to do. She found to her own surprise, that she did not want to kill him. Or throw him in jail. Or torture him. In that moment of reckoning, she found she only wanted one thing: a son. So, this is what she demanded of the young man who killed her son. "Come into my home and live with me. Eat the food I would have prepared for my son. Wear the clothes I would have made for my son. Become the son I lost." And so, he did.

And that's what God offers to us. We were the sons and daughters lost to him. With great compassion God looked at us through the eyes of Christ, and he threw away the score card of all our failures, all our debts and all our sin. He has invited us not just to visit his palace, but to reside there as full members of the family. In return, he asks us to reflect the family values, by forgiving each other and perhaps by doing this, we might lead those we forgive to a place where they can fully experience God's family as we do.