



Sunday, September 13, 2020

Rev. Robert W. Brown

Matthew 18:21-35

F A C I N G

**CONFLICT**

## INTRODUCTION

Jesus often tried to tell us what the kingdom of heaven was like. I imagine it is much like that baptism we just affirmed; the absolute, unfettered blessing of God and community, filled with the pure loving hope that parents and godparents bring and poured back out on one life. You can feel a sliver of the realm of God in the sacrament!

Of course, *Jesus* knows exactly what the kingdom of heaven is like, but it seems to me, that it is a great struggle for us to understand how radically different God's realm is compared to the kind of world we live in today. Why that is, I have no idea. I suppose it is because the Gospel often threatens us. It really doesn't easily conform to our understanding of the world or, the way we think things *should* work".

However, we who follow in the Way of Jesus, must study these words and consider carefully his stories. We must think deeply about these parables and how they apply to our lives. This Gospel we have been given is the blueprint to "the good life", a peaceful life, a life of blessing and wholeness. Yes, "the kingdom of heaven is like", but also "the kingdom of heaven is at hand." How might we understand and live into both the already and the not yet?

Hear this challenging parable from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 18...

## SCRIPTURE READING Matthew 18:21-35

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked,

"Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?"

Jesus answered,

"I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

At this the servant fell on his knees before him.

'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.'

The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him.

'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded.

"His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him,

'Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.'

But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

Then the master called the servant in.

'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?'

In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

## SERMON

*Merciful, forgiving God of all grace, teach us your ways and give us the understanding and courage truly live as you would have us. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you our Rock and our Redeemer. AMEN*

I hope you picked up on the stark paradox in this parable. Jesus answers Peter's question about how many times to forgive someone with a story about a high-ranking servant who owes the king an unimaginable amount of money (10 thousand bags of gold). In that day, that much gold was worth more than Jeff Bezos. It was an incalculable amount of debt. The servant is about to lose everything, every possession will be sold, his portfolio assets frozen, his family sold on the open market as slaves alongside him! This is as serious as it gets. The king, however, does not restructure the loan, offer a bailout program or even suggest a stimulus package to put the servant back on his feet. He simply forgives the entire debt! Sweet!

The servant though, somehow feels threatened by this extravagant act of generosity. I don't know, but maybe the finely crafted illusion of his supposed wealth and success will be exposed. Then, he would most certainly tumble off the top of the wealth pyramid and lose the extraordinary power he's been handed by virtue of his fraudulent position. Whatever the case, learning nothing, that very same day, the servant assaults a man who owes him a far less debt than what he has just been forgiven. When the man pleads for the exact same mercy as the servant did just hours ago, he is thrown unceremoniously into debtors' prison!

When the king hears about this he is enraged.

*'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?'*

*In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.*

Now, on one hand this feels kind of like justice, right? The man is sentenced to drink his own poison. This is "eye for an eye" justice. Something primal in me loves to witness justice like this being meted out, like when that crazy driver on 128 speeds up to within a foot of your bumper then swerves in-between two slower minivans to get 50 feet further down the road. Just once I'd love to see a state trooper witnessing the whole thing from the median. Just once I'd love to see that driver pulled over...

Anyway, herein is where the paradox lies. Peter is wondering just how far forgiveness should go. He wants to codify justice. He generously suggests seven times in a row. That's a lot of forgiveness and for most of us it even boards on empowering the one who sins. Jesus goes way further than that, saying,

*"I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."*

He then explains this with a story about what the kingdom of heaven is like. He lifts up the idea of unlimited mercy, but paradoxically, the story ends up with the king granting no mercy, but rather giving the servant his just desserts.

As in all the parables, there is a deeper truth that Jesus highlights. I don't think this is a parable about justice, or even how many times we are supposed to forgive one another! I think Jesus is pointing to **the inevitable correlation between the forgiveness we extend to others and the forgiveness we receive**. Earlier in Matthews Gospel, Jesus taught us to pray, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." It would seem that we create our own justice and are held to that very same standard. And that is the power in this parable. I confess that sometimes; I have been the one whose grill you have seen in your rearview mirror.

In the kingdom of heaven, we recognize that we too might behave badly and are in need of forgiveness. Now it is important to say that this kind of forgiveness in no way means that we are to forgive in such a way that continues an abusive situation. To allow or empower a continued harmful, demeaning and dehumanizing behavior is not what Jesus is talking about at all. This forgiveness takes the necessary steps needed to end abuse. This is the kind of love offered in the realm of God that can only bring about an inevitable justice.

Jesus answers Peter's question about how many times should we forgive by first saying this.

"The kingdom of *heaven* is like..." this is not a parable about law and order, it's a parable about the way God wants us to live. Jesus is saying that the kingdom of heaven is at hand. We can learn to live in God's realm of love and mercy right now. This is a love and mercy that know no bounds. A love and mercy know no limits. The depth of grace in God's realm is incalculable, as incalculable as the debt the servant owed. That's hard to swallow when all you can see in your rear-view mirror is a grill, but that's what the kingdom of God is like. Can we actually do that? It just may be worth giving it a try.

Whenever our safety is threatened or our idea of what is just comes into question, conflict is immediately ignited. And like a spark landing on dry tinder, the flame of conflict grows with alarming escalation, ferociously burning in our soul minute by minute, destroying our equilibrium and inciting chaos. Our only hope is to confront conflict head on with mercy, grace and forgiveness and learn from the turmoil how we might behave differently in the future.

To experience conflict and paradox is simply to be a human being. Our reaction to conflict is entirely in our control, and we must wrestle out a deeper truth in paradox. Accountability is critically important, but we can never totally and satisfactorily codify what is just. Jesus says here that both justice and mercy work hand in hand, and mercy will always bring about true justice. It is as inevitable as gravity. Conflict is part of life, and in a world today is so filled with division, resentment, anger and recrimination. Yet, we as followers of Christ, are called to model the forgiveness we have been granted by God. This is a daily discipline. When we are offended, can we choose mercy instead of fantasizing about our idea of what is just? Can we see ourselves in the others shoes and know that God's justice will lovingly prevail for every soul? Mercy always wins out. Justice is simply the byproduct.

To live in the flow of God's mercy is to know a deep peace, even in the middle of conflict. Our resentments can be released into the realm of God here on earth as it is in heaven. And, as always, Jesus says it is completely up to us whether we live in the realm of God or the divisive, deteriorating realm of our human condition. We have an option. Jesus tells us that the true and deep peace comes through the gates of insurmountable grace and incalculable forgiveness. I pray that we all might hear this parable and find that deep peace. (Even while driving on 128.)

AMEN