

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Year A - 13/9/2020

Exodus 14:19-31

Psalm 114

Romans 14:1-14

Matthew 18:21-35

**In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...**

Last week, I began to set the scene to this whole challenging notion of forgiveness. I suggested that even in what we might see as our more legalistic dealings with each other we needed to keep at the heart of these the sense of relationship and love that God desires for us all. And so to today's Gospel, which expands our thinking even more, by the use of a parable. It has been said that this is the hardest parable to preach on. In fact, the parable itself is not hard at all! It's just that its message is so confronting that we struggle to accept it.

And I guess that's the point of a parable, isn't it? It is supposed to make us feel uncomfortable; to challenge our sometimes sentimental view of Jesus' teachings as being ones which only make us feel comfortable when, in fact, they are designed to make us feel decidedly uncomfortable, disturbed, and challenged.

The need to forgive one another is something Jesus emphasised again and again. In the gospel this morning, Peter asks Jesus, How often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times? Jesus says, Not seven times, but seventy seven times. (of course, he doesn't mean literally seventy seven times. In the idiom of that time this is a way of saying, There's no limit; you don't count; you just keep on forgiving.) Then he goes on to tell the parable.

It's the story of a king settling accounts with his slaves. One of them owed him ten thousand talents. This was an enormous amount of money, literally millions of dollars, such a huge amount that it's hard to imagine that it could every possibly be repaid.

The king demanded his money, but when the slave begged for mercy the king let him off the debt altogether. But then this same slave went out from the king and came across a fellow slave who owed him 100 denarii: about \$20. He demanded repayment, and the other slave begged for mercy, but this was refused, and he had him thrown into prison. When the king was told about this he was furious: "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?"

It would seem that what we are supposed to take from this parable is this: God has had mercy on us, forgiving us our sin, our shortcomings, our failures, not holding them against us. Having been shown such great mercy by God, we surely must forgive others when they wrong us. There's a link between God's forgiving us our sins, and our forgiving other people who wrong us. God shows mercy to us, we correspondingly must show mercy to others.

So forgiveness is central to what it means to be a Christian. However, there is more to this than first meets the eye. For in the master offering the servant an opportunity to wipe the slate clean; to clear his debt; he is offering much more. The servant glimpses, through his master's action, a new way of life. He introduces the servant to a debt-free world, a world in which debts can be cancelled; past wrongs forgiven. He told the servant he would have to pay nothing. Jesus here is 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 heart is extravagantly kind. Understanding what this means and choosing to live within such a world is a tall order for each of us. Whether we can respond in kind is an open question, a bottom line question for each of us for whom Jesus tells this parable.

Certainly in the case of this servant, it is a response he is unable to make - because we know what happens when he goes out and encounters someone who owes him.

His response comes straight from his life-long experience. It is a learned response, in many ways. He forgets there is another way, to which he has just been exposed. In effect Jesus is saying to his hearers, there is a lifestyle which deals with debts and indebtedness, bondage and slavery; and there is another in which debts are not an issue because forgiveness in that lifestyle sets you free. The shocking thing for us is that, surprising as it may be, we have a choice-- to live in one way or the other. In the parable that Jesus tells, the unforgiving servant chooses to go back to the only world he knows best, the one ruled by debts and indebtedness.

We live in a society in which we like to hold others responsible for things. “Who is to blame”? we want to know, when an accident occurs. “Someone has to pay,” we have been taught. In this world of debt, nobody gets away with anything. In that dimension of life, which Jesus introduces, however, freedom is at the heart of everything – a freedom that permeates his life and death. At the cross, we who know all about indebtedness might expect him to cry, “Who is responsible for this? The Romans? The Jews? The Pharisees? The people who said and did nothing? My Father in heaven?”

Instead, we hear him cry, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

It is this emancipating perspective, the ability not to have to hold on to others with some chain of indebtedness which not only sets us free from bondage to hatred, jealousy, frustration and greed, but opens the future to us. And this perspective is at the heart of the Christian faith. Endless forgiveness makes no sense to our human way of thinking, but without it we can never live open-ended lives.

Being a Christian involves us daily in a consideration of choices between an older, dead-end way of doing things and an eternally new, open-ended possibility.

The story is told of Nelson Mandela, and his words upon being freed after 27 years of wrongful imprisonment by the Afrikaner Government.

He said, “As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I'd still be in prison.”.

In his parable told to us today, we too are asked the questions: How do you want your life to turn out? Would you prefer to live in freedom or bondage? And, as with all good parables, there is a stress connected to the ending? The story is waiting for the kinds of choices you and I will make.

Forgiveness is at the centre of Christianity: God's forgiveness of our sin, and our need to forgive those who sin against us. We may not hold on to our grudges, our resentments against others. We cannot seek revenge, to get our own back. We are to forgive, not seven times, but without limit, or as many times as it takes to love someone back into relationship with us. Our God is an infinitely forgiving God, and we are therefore called to the same spirit of forgiveness...

In the name of Christ. Amen.