

September 13, 2020

Matthew 18:21-35

St. Michael's Episcopal Church, Norman OK

JMH

Once upon a time, in a kingdom far away...

This is the language of fantasy and fairy tale, we know it from childhood. What follows will be a story not of how things appear on the surface, but of a truth deeper than outward appearances. The prince transformed by dark magic into a beast, and the princess in rags, wearing only a single sparkly shoe, become one in heart and soul. The red-caped heroine's journey through the woods is completed, not without danger and hurt and even death along the way, and the one who makes the journey is forever transformed by it.

We know those stories. We know they take us into unexpected places. And we hear one like it today, about a king and his servants and an impossible amount of money (One Talent would be thirty years' wages to someone in Jesus' time. One talent, times ten thousand of them, tells us this is a story unlike other stories.)

Our gospel lesson from Matthew plunges us into the middle of Jesus' teaching on forgiveness. Peter asks "How often shall I forgive my brother who has sinned against me? Seven times? (He thinks he's being very generous.) Jesus answers him "Not seven times, but listen: Seventy seven times (or perhaps seventy times seven—490 times.) In other words, stop counting. Forgive often, without calculating or keeping score of who's up and who's down.

It is a hard teaching. Because we want to keep score, we want to hold on to the slights and insults and offenses that pile up against us. What Jesus is saying is almost unnatural, to our human natures.

And yet it is perhaps the most essential teaching that Jesus brings.

We hear these words, thousands of years old, in a world that is gasping for breath in the face of climate change and an international pandemic; in a nation that is struggling

for justice in the face of systemic economic and racial oppression, inequality and violence; in a city that has been divided, neighbor set against neighbor by financial interest and self-centered disregard of the poor and needy. We see the pictures of the fires in the west, in Oregon and Washington and California; of the ravages of hurricane damage in Louisiana and the Caribbean, of the protestors in the streets and those who stand with weapons and shields and violence at the ready.

We hear these ancient words of Jesus and recoil, as they confront and challenge so much of what we experience daily.

Peter asks Jesus “What shall I do about the one who has sinned against me?” He thinks he’s being generous by offering up to seven instances of forgiveness. Jesus reject that offer of supposed generosity. He says “Stop counting. Forgive, period. Do not hold on to the debt.” Debt is an economic word. There’s a reason it’s there. Then and now, the system, the economics of debt and dependence and domination leading to oppression were, and are, deadly. Destructive. Unholy. The antithesis of forgiveness, opposed to the Kingdom of Heaven.

Peter does not ask Jesus “What shall I do if I have sinned against someone else?” because the answer is obvious—or should be. “Go and ask forgiveness. Do not delay. Seventy times seven if need be, seven times a day if that’s what it takes.”

Anyone who has ever been in a relationship with another person can tell you about that. Whether that is a marriage, or a friendship, or any regular sustained interaction between two people. Big fights and disagreements don’t just appear out of nowhere. It’s the little things, the slights and resentments and aggravations, the things done and left undone, that accumulate over time in the account books of our hearts and minds. Seemingly insignificant, like a slow drip of water against a stone that gradually wears it away into a shallow bowl until there is nothing left.

Unless forgiveness is present and available. Sought and offered; offered and sought.

We began our service this morning with the Penitential Order. We acknowledged right away that our relationships are not what they ought to be, are not what God

desires for us and one another. We asked for, and received the promise of, God's mercy and forgiveness and loving-kindness.

In a minute we will pray to God as our Heavenly Father:  
Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.  
In other words: Treat us, O God, as we treat one another.  
Oh dear.

So how do you want to be treated?  
By God, by other people?

With patience?  
Kindness?  
Understanding?  
Mercy?

I know I need all of those things, every day.  
Maybe you need them too.

How do we treat other people?  
In our actions, in our speech, in our thoughts?  
Are they "Them people over there, not like us"  
or are they God's people? Made in the image and likeness of God,  
even in their imperfection and fearful foolishness?

What do we hope for those people? What do we hope for ourselves?

Forgive our sins, as we forgive, you taught us, Lord, to pray;  
But you alone can give us grace to live the words we say.

May it be so, for us and among us, this day and always.  
Amen.