

The Rev. Erin Hensley  
September 17, 2017  
The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Matthew 18:21-35

### In Order to be Re-membered

God's economy, God's household management is different than business as usual in worldly kingdom. Jesus talks about the house rules for disciples then and now in chapter 18 of Matthew's Gospel. The words we hear from Jesus to his disciples today are the end of a discourse with them on life together, on the hallmarks of Christian community. We are to be humble, we are to rejoice over the one that is found more so than the 99 that never go astray. We are to seek one another out in private to talk about pain. If we need a friend to help us listen to each other better, then we take a friend. We may need to invite more people into this so that restoration can occur. And if there is no restoration, then we shake the dust off our feet and do our best to keep walking. Peter follows Jesus' logic and says to him, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus responds to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.' Or, as some translations say seventy times seven. In other words, forgiveness is the norm, not the exception, in Christian community here and now.

The practice of forgiveness is no easy task, however, because worldly kingdoms rise and fall on credit and debts and keeping score. Worldly kingdoms make people pay and when you can't pay put you in prison and, of course, add another fine. They are predicated on comparison and being tough on crime. How can one forgive in such an unforgiving world?

Hold on, you might say, people get away with murder here, in one fell swoop or slowly over time with structures that oppress? You don't think we ought to do something about it? Of course, we ought to do something about it.

The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a human king who settles accounts with his officials.<sup>1</sup> His Chief Financial Officer owed him ten thousand talents, the largest figure used in accounting during Jesus' day,<sup>2</sup> came before the king. The king ordered that his wife, his children, all his possessions be sold for payment to be made. The CFO of the kingdom fell on his knees saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything."

Then the king of that official was moved with compassion, and loosed him, and forgave him the debt.

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<sup>1</sup>Editor Paul Nuechterlein, "Exegetical Notes 18:21-35" Girardian Reflections on the Lectionary, "This is the first of four consecutive major parables in Matthew that begin with a double designation to introduce the main character: 18:23: *anthrōpō basilei* — "a man, a king" ; 20:1: *anthrōpō oikodespotē* — "a man, a housemaster; 21:33: *anthrōpos ēn oikodespotēs* — "There was a man, a housemaster"; 22:2: *anthrōpō basilei* — "a man, a king."

Some commentators say that the use of *anthropos* before "king" or "housemaster" is a typical Aramaism. But what if Matthew is trying to tell us something? Very often in history an allegorical interpretation is applied to these parables in which this main character is interpreted as God. But what if Matthew is using the double designation to make sure we don't do that? That this householder should simply be seen as a man and not as God?"

<sup>2</sup>Joseph A. Komanchak "How large the debt?" *Commonweal Magazine* September 12, 2011, *Commonweal Magazine* <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/how-large-debts>.

Such debt forgiveness is an economic revolution with ripple effects for the whole system. The income for which the CFO was responsible was from as one scholar says “those lower on the pyramid of patronage.” In other words, the king’s mercy affects everyone from the CFO to the janitor of the jail.<sup>3</sup> The revolution in the worldly kingdom is short lived, however.

That servant whose unpayable debt was forgiven came upon another worker that owed him about four months worth of taxes. The forgiven servant took this man by the throat and the man said the same thing “have patience with me, and I will pay you all.” But the forgiven servant refused; the forgiven one became the unforgiving one and threw the middle man in debtors’ prison.

When others saw what happened, they were greatly disturbed. They reported what they had seen to their king. The king then called for the unforgiving servant and said “I forgave you all that debt. Shouldn’t you have had compassion on your fellow man as I had compassion for you?” And in his anger, the human king, handed him over to the tormenters until he paid his entire debt.

A person is invited into a kingdom of limitless grace and this world is so different that we know not how to reside in such a place. Forgiveness is such a hard thing. The fact that the phrase “forgive and forget” is tossed around as if Jesus said these words is not helpful either. The phrase “forgive and forget” goes back only to the 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> century via the writings of Miguel de Cervantes in *Man of La Mancha* “Let us forget and forgive injuries” and the writing of Shakespeare in *King Lear* “Pray you now, forget and forgive.”<sup>4</sup>

Remember, too, that the words from Jesus on forgiveness and this parable on forgiveness comes after Jesus telling disciples that when “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one” and so on. We remember the pain. We do not run away from the pain. And at the same time, we remember to release pain, to find ourselves found and liberated in the mercy of God and one another. We remember and name sin in order be honest about who we are becoming and to check this against who we are-beloved children of God.<sup>5</sup> We remember in order to be re-membered in a different economic system. One grounded in mercy, abundance, interdependence, restoration, rather than the worldly economy of cruelty, scarcity, self-sufficiency and revenge.

You’re probably wondering about the last verse in today’s Gospel passage; I know I am. How on earth, how in God’s name, can we be invited into a world of grace with such stern words from Jesus immediately after the parable “So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.” Is Jesus really saying that if we do not forgive from our heart, we will be imprisoned and

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<sup>3</sup> Stanley Saunders “Commentary on Matthew 18:21-35” *Working Preacher*, September 11, 2017, [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3393](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3393).

<sup>4</sup> Blossom Turner “I will forgive, but never forget!” February 4, 2013, <http://www.blossomturner.com/is-it-possible-to-forgive-and-forget/>

<sup>5</sup> The Rev. Dr. John H. Westerhoff *Holy Baptism: A Guide for Parents and Godparents* (Atlanta: St. Luke’s Press, 1996) 18. “Sin is not actions we engage in which are against God’s law. Sin is the disposition to act in ways that negatively affect the relationships God intends for us to have with God, ourselves, other persons, and creation. Sin is not so much concerned with right or wrong, as it is with what kind of person we are becoming.”

tortured forever? This does not sound like a loving God. True, destruction is not godly. However, when we cannot yet forgive, when we cannot let go of those hurts, we do find ourselves in great pain. I do not believe God imprisons us for such torture. Jesus, like other rabbis of his day, used extreme hyperbole to make a point. Let forgiveness, like humility, like speaking truth directly in love, like seeking one another in the midst of all the ways we are lost, be hallmarks of Christian community. For we are invited to a world of compassion beyond numbers in this world in our time. We are forgiven and with God's help, may we encounter the hard work of forgiveness that can sometimes take years or even a lifetime.

Thankfully, in God's time, we have enough time. In the kingdom of heaven above and here below, there is always enough time to try. There is always time and space to circle back to God's mercy. The mercy that has forgiven and continues to forgive in the midst of our explicit, subconscious, individual and collective ways we hurt one another and the rest of God's creation. The constant giving and humility of God in Jesus the Christ who refused to participate in evil for evil. This is the giving and forgiving to which followers of Jesus belong and belong. This is the revolution of an economy that acknowledges pain, rather than running away or seeking revenge. This is the revolution of economy that offers compassion all the way down, all the way out, like the body of Jesus, rather than just for those at the top. This is where the healing happens in the giving and the forgiving and the trying to do both with God's help together.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Catherine Gray, "To the Church: Your love is hurting us," September 12, 2017, <http://www.unsilencedwoman.com/church-your-love-is-hurting-us/>.

"I haven't gone to church in months, and I know many young people who have similarly walked away. We meet instead in our homes or in coffee shops and tell stories like the ones I'm telling here. We try to reconcile the Gospel we've read with what we hear from the pulpit and see before us.

You are losing us. You are losing young people who need to hear the bold message of the Gospel speak to today's times. We are looking for a community of Christ followers who are willing to take risks and have difficult conversations out in the open. Imagine what that kind of love could do...

Jesus came to us in the flesh. I need clergy to put some flesh and bones on this love narrative. I need clergy who can touch the places where the world has wounded us and say, "Your pain is real." I need clergy who will turn our eyes toward our suffering neighbors and send marching orders to the hearts, hands, and feet of this Body. I need clergy who are more concerned with helping those who are suffering than hurting those who are comfortable.

A love movement doesn't run from pain. It runs toward the pain. Because it knows that that's where the healing happens."