

Matthew 18:21-35

September 13, 2020

Randy Smith

"What If Everyone Got What They Deserved?"

There is a **problem** -- a **big** problem, a **core issue** -- in the life of the church which is addressed by Matthew's Gospel, a problem which, if left **unaddressed**, and **unresolved**, will be the **undoing** of the church's capacity to make anything *even resembling* a **true and compelling witness** before their world to Jesus and the Resurrection.

And the Gospel writer puts the problem on display in the **artful** way he *begins* the story of this conversation between Jesus and his first disciples. It's on display there in the way Peter -- acting, as usual, as spokesman for his fellow disciples -- *poses* his question to Jesus: "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?" Listen carefully -- more carefully, I admit, than I've ever done before: What's **the premise** of Peter's question? His premise is that **he** is the one who *is*, or who *will be*, in the position of **offering** forgiveness to another. He doesn't come to Jesus asking, "Lord, Jesus, how often can I *be forgiven* by another member of the church?" Why?

Well, you have to assume it's because he thinks he is -- **basically** -- doing okay with God, thank you very much, and isn't in need -- at least *much* in need -- of **being** forgiven. No, he sees himself instead as the one doling out forgiveness to others, and he comes here to Jesus asking about the **moral mathematics** of the situation -- "How **often** should I forgive, Lord?" -- and then offers up what he must consider to be a **plenty** generous number of times, *viz.*, seven. "As many as **seven** times, Lord?"

And in doing so, Peter **shows** us the big problem. In the life of the earliest church, and in the life of the Church today, and **it is this**: that we **struggle** to understand, **deeply** -- and in a **life-changing** way -- that our **fundamental identity**, as followers of Christ, and as the Church, is that **we are the forgiven**.

I have to think that this conversation **had** to be one of a *number* of occasions on which Jesus **had** to wonder if it was all really **worth it** -- announcing the gospel, the Good News, of the in-breaking of the "**kingdom of heaven**" in the life of planet earth (Mt. 3:2: "Repent..."), and then calling **disciples** to **learn** from him (the meaning of "disciple" is "**student**") how to live in respect of this new, revolutionary reality, and then **traveling** all over, all the time ("Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" -- Mt. 8:20), teaching, healing, casting out unclean spirits or, *i.e.*, saying and doing the kinds of things which were **signs**, *pointing* to the kingdom -- the **new order** -- which is breaking into the life of the world.

But, *here, now* -- 18 chapters into this remarkable story -- his disciples do not seem to have climbed up very far on the **learning curve** which Jesus' calling them presented them with. Living a life in this world, in ever greater conformity to the revolutionary new order of the kingdom of heaven, is just too...well, **revolutionary**.

To his enormous credit, Jesus seems nonetheless to *maintain* his composure. **First**, he answers Peter's question in a way which blows up Peter's whole premise, by saying to him, in effect, "Are you kidding! You need to forgive a **bazillion** times, Peter!" Forgiveness is **not** a limitable commodity, to be doled out by people -- like you! -- who don't *first* understand that **they** are the **forgiven**! *I.e.*, moral mathematics just does not enter into the life of the kingdom of heaven (*or* God) at all! And **then** Jesus tells another **parable of the kingdom** to drive his point home.

We need to think of the "king" in this parable as a big **CEO type**, as someone who has positioned himself at the top of an enormous **pyramid scheme**, with many people below him at various levels, all working with his resources, to invest and multiply those resources and send the vast majority of the profits up to the top of pyramid. Each of the king's underlings are meant, of course, to line their own pockets with some of the profits -- but not too much. The basic idea is to send enough ROI to the top to keep the boss happy, while also maximizing your own cut at your particular level below. So, the story is **not** about one king and one slave: it is about an **enormous system** of enterprise, *comprising* and *impacting* the lives of many people, but designed to **always** ensure that those **at the top** enjoy a continuous flow of *wealth, power* and *honor*.

The dollar figures in the story are super exaggerated for effect. One commentator rendered "10,000 talents" as 150,000 **years** of average take home pay in 1st-c. AD Judea. Another simply says: "Think Bill Gates" kind of wealth. The 100 **denarii**, on the other hand, was a much more serviceable amount of debt (although not in *this* case, apparently). But we understand that the "unforgiving slave" is, in any case, a **high-level manager of big money**. The astronomical "debt" he owes the king is the income he was *supposed* to have made for the king from those below him.

Why, when the king demands to settle accounts, is the money not there? Did investments go south? Did he skim **too much** off the top for himself, and then **squander** it? In any case, he is utterly at fault, and can therefore only beg for mercy, which he does, and -- to what is supposed to be our huge surprise -- does so successfully!

An amount something like Bill Gates' total assets -- forgiven. Lost. Written off. Inconceivable, right?

It's critically important to understand what is going on here. This is not -- **just** -- the story of some *incomprehensibly benevolent*, and **generous** ruler. **This is about a ruler who -- for whatever reasons -- wants to induce a change in the whole system which he sits at the top of.** Writing off his chief slaves *astounding* debt -- that act of pure, undeserved mercy -- is intended to have a **cascading effect** all the way down the pyramid, bringing **relief** -- *viz.*, **mercy** -- to **everyone** in his debt.

But the king's chief slave **stops** this revolutionary change in its tracks. At the first opportunity, he resorts to **the old ways** of "pay me what you owe *or else*". It's back to "business as usual". He must take his king, not for the astonishingly **merciful** ruler he is, but for some kind of **sucker**. The slave -- with now less to pay to the King -- will be able to take, and keep, much more for himself. When the king is informed of this, however -- that his chief slave **insists on** continuing to live and operate within the **old ways** -- he then *gives* the slave what the slave clearly *wants*, *viz.*, the **old ways** of "pay me what you owe *or else*". In the slave's case, the "or else" means being **tortured** in prison until he makes repayment to his king **with his life**.

If you're **surprised** to hear Jesus telling a parable such as this -- about **real forgiveness** of **real debts**, and the new order such mercy is intended to bring about in human life -- you really **shouldn't** be. After all, when -- in Matthew's Gospel -- he teaches his disciples to **pray**, he teaches them to pray, "And forgive us our **debts**, as we also have forgiven our **debtors**." (In Luke's Gospel, by the way, it is "forgive us our *sins*..." We United Methodists pray "forgive us our trespasses" only because it is translated that way in the original BCP of the CofE used by John and Charles Wesley, because Thomas Cranmer thought "trespasses" to be a less incendiary rendering of the Greek *opheilema* than "debts".)

"**Debt**," says Walter Brueggemann about this passage, "is the governance of **the old order**. Debt lasts forever and keeps people in hopelessness." Cf. the American student loan debt load -- currently \$1.64 trillion borne by 45 million Americans -- as a new form of **indentured servanthood**:

default on your student loans and destroy your **credit rating**. Destroy your credit rating, and you become a **non-entity** in modern life, a way of life dependent on **everyone** being -- **found worthy!** -- of **being in debt** to **someone** for as long as you live. Turn *off* the **credit** flow -- as almost happened around the time of the 2008 global financial crisis -- or even hold those debt repayments up *for a few months* in a time of **viral pandemic**, and the **havoc** it is wreaking, *especially* on the poorest people, and in the poorest nations -- and that whole way of life -- the **house of cards**, built of **endless, interdependent debt obligations** -- comes under dire stress.

And this **perpetual indebtedness** *also* makes it all but **impossible** for people to be **merciful**: the landlord **must** collect the rents from his tenants in order to pay the mortgage on the apartment building, and the lender of that mortgage money **must** get that payment, both to pay off their own debts and to make new loans, in order to make more money. It's a **giant vacuum machine**, continually sucking up money from **the bottom** to the **top**.

Sound familiar?

Until, that is, this crazy "king" at the top one day says, "Stop." Reverse the flow. And our **first, deep, visceral** reaction is "No!" It's **not possible**. *Nobody* in their right mind **willingly** takes a **loss** -- a really, **really big write-off**.

But the essence of the gospel is that, in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God takes a really, really big write-off. It is nowhere better expressed than in the resounding words of the apostle Paul (2 Cor. 5:19): "In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, **not counting their [sins] against them...**" There are, Paul is saying, no **accountants**, and no **ledgers** in the kingdom of heaven, *viz.*, wherever, and whenever God gets what God wants.

And, so, the essence of the presence of the kingdom of heaven is forgiveness. What do you think Jesus means when he teaches us to pray, "Thy will be done **on earth**, as it is **in heaven**"? I think he meant what he later more fully illustrated in this story (18:33), asking **each** of us -- but *especially* **all of us** together as his Church -- "Should **you** not have had **mercy** on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?" The obvious answer is, of course, "Yes". And so the Church exists to -- *first* of all -- **embody** that *obvious* answer in its own *alternative* way of life-together -- a way of life **founded on love of God and neighbor** -- and *then* to **enact** that neighborliness in the life of the world we are a part of.

If everybody got what they deserved, *i.e.*, the gospel would be an impossibility.