

2017 09 17 - Ordinary Time: Forgiveness

Psalm 103:1-13

Matthew 18:21-35

You may have seen it in a classroom or office - on faded paper, pinned to a board: "The floggings will continue until morale improves."

If you're going to cite a verse to describe the worst that people think of Christianity, you could try the conclusion of this parable.

In anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.

Forgiveness is either difficult, or it is unnecessary.

When was the last time you forgave someone for something? How hard was it to do? Chances are you're only going to remember the difficult experiences of forgiveness. The times when you were infuriated, not just annoyed. When you are injured, not merely inconvenienced. When the marks were left by cruelty or carelessness, not accident or error.

The always-entertaining philosopher Slavoj Žižek describes the contemporary Western process of rebuilding relationships after someone has done something wrong. The person who has done wrong will apologise. The other person responds 'don't worry about it' or 'no problem' or 'no apology necessary', and nothing more needs to be said.

But of course, it's not true. Of course an apology was necessary. There was a problem, after all. If the first person hadn't apologised, you can bet that there would be a problem! But because they said sorry, they can be told 'there is nothing to be sorry about'.

That's all well and good for the small stuff, or for first offenses. You can move on, move past, move forward or possibly move out. And Jesus has already given his disciples a multi-layered process for individual reconciliation and community accountability when Peter comes over and says 'okay, I got it, thanks for the flow-chart, but how many times do I have to go through this if it keeps happening - as many as seven?'

Seven is a very generous amount, the most that any Rabbi suggested, with two or three as a more common response, so Peter was offering the outer limit. Jesus had a different limit in mind. His response of 'seventy-seven' or 'seventy-times seven' should be taken as rhetorical, not exact. He challenges the idea of human relationships as a series of barter or exchanges. Stop counting transgressions, participate instead in grace.

I am confident that at least some of the people there at the time must have tried to figure out how this was going to work out. I know that's where I go. If I keep forgiving, what will stop people from taking advantage of me? Doesn't it erode the importance of forgiveness if I keep forgiving and never draw a line? Does this only apply to people who apologise or am I meant to let everyone off the hook now?

As if to forestall these very sensible objections, Jesus goes directly into a parable of the Kingdom. A powerful king is settling accounts with a slave who cannot pay. He is forgiven his colossal debt but then refuses to forgive the smaller debt of a fellow slave.

The first part of this parable is clearly the boundless nature of the debt forgiveness. One talent is over 15 years of wages, so a forgiving a debt of 10,000 is the same over the top measure as forgiving 77 or 490 times. The message seems to be - you have been forgiven more than you can possibly imagine, so do not be stingy when it is time to forgive others.

We find this same formula in the Lord's Prayer, and in some versions even the line 'forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors'.

Understanding this as a parable about extravagant forgiveness allows us to fast forward through the rest of the story. Even after his debt is forgiven, the slave is vicious towards his own debtor. When the king learns of this, he rescinds his forgiveness and sends the slave to be tortured until he pays his debt.

It's not a happy story. No one ends up with anything other than what they were owed at the beginning, and there is a lot of pain and terror along the way. At the end of the day, no one is any happier, but the worst sort of punitive justice achieved. The Kingdom of Heaven might be glimpsed in the overwhelming forgiveness of the king, but I don't think we like the implications of the Royal Flip-flop. Because the slave didn't replicate the ethics of the king, he gets tortured and has to pay up anyway! If forgiveness represents the Kingdom, it suggests that something more is required!

How might the original audience have felt when they heard this parable? If they felt humour at the absurd size of the first debt, it may have been met with internal pain at the thought of having to repay such a sum. Some of Jesus' more cynical disciples, possibly including some of us, might have rolled their eyes at the king's moralizing. After all, it's easy enough for a king to forgive a debt - he is still king. Others would know that this is all metaphorical, and would agree with the king - if the slave can't offer the same kindness that he was shown, he does not deserve it.

Some, especially those personally acquainted with the crushing weight of impossible debts, might feel this story differently. What impact on the debtor would this impossible demand and miraculous forgiveness have? The utter humiliation of having your life and family tallied up for sale, having to beg, and then having it all waved away as if it were nothing. Being vulnerable in front of such power, no wonder the slave takes whatever steps he can to make sure this never happens to him again.

But there is another set of actors. It is the community of fellow slaves that reports the injustice and bring down the king's wrath. Are they acting out of a desire for justice? Jealousy? Out of solidarity with their imprisoned fellow? Are they also debtors to the first slave, and next in line to be imprisoned?

How and why do this community of workers organise themselves to respond to the violence done to their member? We will return to this question.

One responsibility I have today is to introduce the Autumn Preaching Theme of 'Ordinary Time'. Ordinary Time refers to the periods of time in the church calendar which are not organised around specific celebrations or commemorations. The time is 'ordinal', meaning that it follows in order, day by day. In the Liturgical Calendar we have been in Ordinary Time since Pentecost marked the end of the Easter Season, and this lasts until Advent begins.

In Ordinary Time, we aren't specifically thinking about the Birth or the Death and Resurrection of Jesus. We aren't preparing for these seasons full of meaning. We are simply getting on with business, the businesses of blessing babies, joining in marriage, and remembrance of the dead. The ancient pulse of germ and birth. The healing of the sick, teaching and admonishing, looking for signs of God in the world, and caring for one another.

This church is a community. It could not exist without being a community. But it is more than a community. We are gathered for a specific purpose. This autumn we will explore our daily existence as a community, and the specific purpose we are called to. What do you think about when you think about our church? What do you describe to others?

Our building? Our programs? Your favourite TUMC crisis? And what do you say about your place in our church? If you come and talk to me after the service, I'm going to ask you 'what do you do in the church?' I am sure that everyone here can give me an answer that I do not know. I suggest that you experiment with the same question. Ask someone to tell you what they think they do in the church. Maybe you will learn something!

The Psalm we heard before the sermon is a beautiful poetic description of the work of God in our midst. God forgives iniquities, heals diseases, works vindication, and bears compassion. Do we effectively give testimony to this God in our lives and our witness? Can this God be seen at work in our church? I hope we do not look at our community and forget Who it is that has gathered us together.

Let's go back to the parable that Jesus offered. I am confident in saying that the point of this parable is to talk about the amazing forgiveness that God offers to all. As we have been welcomed into God's family, so we welcome others. That is part of our day-to-day, Ordinary Time existence - sharing the love of God and giving thanksgiving for God's goodness.

But also in the parable is a community of scared, imperfect individuals, who see one of their members in pain, who see injustice, and try to fix the problem. That is also the church. The church is in the background, creating conditions for justice, peacemaking, healing and mercy. The church protects and nurtures, and as well as that, it points people to the God who is Protector and Nurturer.

That is our challenge in Ordinary Time. Can we be the ones who gather together on a Sunday morning and sing certain songs and work for peace and justice in our daily living... and also, can we know and make known the hope we have in Jesus? We have to do that second part because we can't reflect the truth of God's abundant goodness through our own efforts. People need the Good News that God's forgiveness is abundant, and they also need to be released from debt.

So we need to work in the here-and-now, the normality of life, and at the same time have our eyes open for the glimpses of the Kingdom of Heaven all around. That is the challenge of Ordinary Time.

I want to close with a poem by Enuma Okoro, who some of you might know as one of the co-creators of the Common Prayer book. This poem is called 'Passing Ordinary Time'.

<https://thevalueofsparrows.com/2016/05/25/poetry-passing-ordinary-time-by-enuma-okoro/>

It is a hard art to learn,
catching quiet
by palms raised
cupped in
air shifting location
here and there like
trying to guess the pattern of falling leaves,
and hoping to feel
the soft descent of moments
when silence slips

This ordinary time is
gifted with days,
weeks of mundane grace
routinely following the liturgy
of hours anticipating creation
tuning its prayer and praise to the
rhythms of incarnate love.

I am used to the uproar,
the Holy drama,
the appetite's gnarled discord
of fasting and feasting on borrowed time,
the knocking of angels,
the blubbering piety of waiting,
appointed seasons for guilt and grief, tears of joy and disbelief,
the birth of miracles, the passion of virgins,
the mourning of a love so divine.

This ordinary time is
gifted in its quiet, marked passing
Christ slips about
calling and baptizing,
sending and affirming,
pour his Spirit like water
into broken cisterns,
sealing cracks and filtering our senses,
that we may savor the foolish
simplicity of his grace.