

God's Economy of Forgiveness

Matthew 18:21-35

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Rev. Laurie Crelly, East Church

Grand Rapids, MI

As we continue to work our way through Matthew's Gospel this church year I want to once again remind you that Matthew's first audience is the first century church as the Age of the Apostles comes to an end. Scholars estimate that Matthew's Gospel was written around 80 A.D. after the fall of the temple in Jerusalem as the church is scattered abroad. Matthew is focused mostly on early Jewish followers of the Way. The structure of the Gospel sets Jesus firmly in the prophetic history of the Jewish people and shows Jesus as opposing the false religion of the Empire, seeking to establish a new society depicted as the Kingdom of God.

The truth that this is written for the early church is never more evident than in Chapters 16-18. It is the only time the word church is used in the Gospel writings. A concept that had not yet been created while Jesus is still alive. Chapter 18 is clear in its numerous instructions regarding the principles of the community and how it differs from the Empire. Chapter 18 lifts up a model of how church people should handle disputes and bad behavior. We know from Paul's writings, like our first reading today, that many of the early church communities had disputes and needed mediation from Paul and others. The theme of repentance and forgiveness is central to the life of the church according to Matthew's writings.

We pick up today's reading at the end of Jesus' teaching on repentance. If we turn back even just a few verses, we find the other half of Jesus' teaching on repentance and forgiveness. These readings need to be seen together, like two sides of the same coin.

Starting in verse 15 we are instructed on what to do when someone sins against us. Jesus teaches we need to go to them, seeking to reconcile the conflict and try to restore the relationship. Reconciliation, confession and forgiveness of others is part of living in community.

Today's reading starts with Peter, as the voice of the community, asking how many times we are obligated to forgive someone. Presuming that this is really a question from the community, the writer offers this parable to help the community see that in God's kingdom there is a different kind of economy at work. The parable depicts the way society and the Empire function by binding people into gross inequality and indebtedness. The rich control all the power and influence, while keeping the common person entrapped in a never-ending cycle of indebtedness.

Professor Melinda Quivik of Luther Seminary describes this false peace of the Roman Empire experienced by Matthew's audience this way: "Despite Roman propaganda about its gracious rule, the "peace of Rome" meant that 98% of the people were oppressed politically, economically, theologically, and militarily so that the 2% could have peace and plenty." The Roman Peace came at the expense of extreme inequality and injustice for the people."

Now one can get entangled in the details of the parable. How much debt did the one servant owe and how small was the second debt etc. But the truth of the matter is that it is clearly hyperbole to help put things into perspective regarding the vastness of humanity's sin against God vs. the individual sins we experience between one another. The exaggeration here is intentional to remind us of the impossibility for us to clear our name and to even mimic the audacity of the Roman way of gaining peace through authoritarian control.

The turning point of the story is not the enormity of the sin or debt, but the vast compassion and mercy expressed by forgiving the debt. It is an act of forgiveness and release from any future obligation to show the contrast of God's kingdom from the

human condition that the people are living under. The ruler shifts their focus from what had been owed them to what was needed to preserve life and dignity for the person's family. The only remaining "debt" is the debt of gratitude. The ruler has given up all power over the servant. The forgiveness offered is a gift we call grace.

One would hope that the servant, having experienced the liberty of debt lifted, would follow the example and go and do likewise. There is no further change of heart for the servant unfortunately. When presented with a similar scene they fail to embrace the shift from selfishness to compassionate generosity. They are still trapped in the other world mindset and keeping close records of all who still owe the servant for past debt. This parable is a call to the believers and church to be different than the world. To not hold score cards but to love one another to a new way of being that is drastically different from the world. It is more than just a simple act of kindness, it is a shift of perspective and a lifestyle choice God calls us to live by.

The stark warning at the end of the parable is a message for the church in Matthew's time and even for us still today. The message of God's abundant grace and mercy comes as a gift to us. We did not earn it; we did not pay for it, and we certainly do not deserve it. When we continue to count the wrongs of others against us, we show that we have not fully rejected the world's economy of an eye for an eye or tooth for a tooth. We have not rejected the false narrative that to have peace we must be indebted to one another as a means of control and influence. This is a dehumanizing practice that Jesus rejected and we too much reject.

The change begins with each one of us. It is a mindset and lifestyle change that we will always need to practice and live by. In part because this world continues to try and impose their way upon us. Even today the inequities of our world economy are seen in the perpetual debt most of us live under. Christ and the message of the Gospel is constantly inviting us to live into this new reality of God's Kingdom. This can only be

done when we let go of the need to keep score and put the relationship above the need to balance the score somehow.

When we recite the Lord's prayer and say "forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." It reminds us that when we hold onto old grudges or fail to forgive others, it costs us too. It costs us in lost relationships, loss in health and a loss in our own happiness and may even jeopardize our salvation.

When we look over the Gospel of Matthew, we see a clear theme in Jesus that the kingdom of God is a kingdom of forgiveness and inclusion. Richard Rohr in his book Things Hidden lifts up this truth from his one understanding.

"My lifetime of studying Jesus would lead me to summarize all of his teaching inside of two prime ideas: forgiveness and inclusion. Don't believe me; just go through the Gospels, story by story. It is rather self-evident. Forgiveness and inclusion are Jesus' "great themes." They are the practical name of love, and without forgiveness and inclusivity love is largely a sentimental valentine. They are also the two practices that most undercut human violence. (150-51)

May we as the church of Christ today remember the power of forgiveness as a healing and loving force in the world. Let us remember the words of Paul from Romans 13:8 reads: "Owe no one anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law."