

13 Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 19 – Year A – September 11, 2011

Exodus 14:19-31; Psalm 114; Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35

Susan E. Wilmot

Jesus often spoke in parables to open the way for a creative response to God and a deeper understanding of God's kingdom. Here's a modern parable. The youth leader gathers the teenagers together for the lesson. He enters the room carrying a dartboard, barely distinguishable because it's covered by a thick sheet of blank paper. There are curious glances and a few muttered questions as the chatter finally subsides. "Hey, what're we doing tonight?" The youth leader quickly explains: "Okay, listen up. Tonight I want you all to think about the people you really dislike, even those you hate. I want you to think about all your enemies, and everyone who's ticked you off. Then I want you to write down their names, draw a picture of them, or do whatever you can to make it as real for you as if they were standing right in front of you." The noise level rises quickly in the room. "Hey, no problem! Wow this is too easy." About five minutes later the youth leader calls for quiet: "Are you all ready? Got the names and pictures of those people clearly fixed in your head as well as on the paper?" "Yeah," is the resounding response. "Okay, let's do this. Take your papers, tape them to the dartboard, then step on up, and take your best shot. We're going to play a little game of arrows, ladies and gentlemen!" The teenagers line up and start shooting darts across the room. "Take that," shouts one senior, "And that," shouts her friend. It doesn't take long for everyone to have a shot.

Matthew has also taken his best shot to reveal the nature of God's abundant grace and the importance of forgiveness as a characteristic of the church. The Gospel also reveals our continuing mission as one of reconciliation in and to an indifferent, sometimes hostile, angry, or violent world. The lesson begins with Peter asking Jesus about forgiveness. The question implies that even in the earliest Christian communities, sinful behavior disrupted relationships, and the community needed to understand how to respond. Sinful behavior is still part of life in community. We tend to be quick to judge others, and eager to demand justice, often in terms of 'an eye for an eye'. Yet Jesus tells us in Matthew 7 (vs. 3-12) to stop judging others and take the log out of our own eye, so that we might see clearly enough to take the speck out of our neighbor's eye. Our common humanity makes us *all* equal and precious in God's sight. Our sinfulness is the great equalizer. As Christians, the ongoing process of our transformation from self-centered willfulness to Christ-like humility and obedience takes a lifetime. Jesus' teachings are like a mirror that helps us to see who we really are. God's desire is that self-knowledge in the light of His truth, will bring us to repentance, and awake in us a deep and abiding gratitude for God's abundant goodness, grace, and mercy.

Jesus' response to Peter speaks of God's gracious and merciful character, and how we are called to reflect the same level of grace and mercy in our relationships. The parable that follows is deeply disturbing, because the king first offers forgiveness and then withdraws that forgiveness in a brutal fashion. It was common in Jesus' day for Rabbinic parables to include a king. While it's tempting for us to equate the king with God, that's a poor use of the parable, and a false assumption. In fact, the whole story is one of a negative, worldly example that clearly contrasts with God's true nature. The last verse sounds like a threatening condition for God's own forgiveness. It conflicts sharply with our understanding and expectation of God's *shalom*, which is peace with justice, and loving-kindness. The whole story of the capricious king, who offers forgiveness one minute and then takes it back the next doesn't reflect what we know of God's abundant mercy. This is not the God we know, who loves us so much that He sent His only Son for the life of the world. Since the story doesn't ring true based on our experience of God, then the purpose must be to reveal something else. In other words, this parable is supposed to provoke a deeper level of thought and awareness in us.

With that aim in mind, it may be that the story draws us in to help us see something about ourselves, and our communal life more clearly. Whom do we most identify with in the story? The fickle king who

demands an accounting, who in mercy releases the slave from the huge debt, which was probably uncollected taxes, but later goes back on his word? Or, perhaps we see ourselves as the servant who seeks mercy for our own debt, whilst judging others harshly, and keeping a running tally of all the debts owed to us? And we're not talking just money here. Maybe we're like the other slaves, who readily see injustice and sinful behavior in others, and like to point fingers, all the time, failing to acknowledge our own sinfulness, our own unforgiving and hardened hearts, and our judgmentalism. At least at one level, we're meant to understand that the king intends for the servant to follow his example of forgiveness. However, at a deeper level, the king's violent response highlights the total inadequacy of worldly standards, and worldly justice as compared to God's justice and God's kingdom. God's kingdom is not based on an 'eye for an eye' justice, but purely on unearned and unmerited grace, and mercy. Having been forgiven so much, who are we to deny forgiveness to anyone, including ourselves? And if we, the Body of Christ, cannot forgive, cannot show the world what freedom in Christ looks like, how can the rest of the world learn about God's love and forgiveness? If we do not forgive, how can we share our hope in Christ? Forgiveness is the shape of God's kingdom.

Back at the youth group gathering. The noise level has gone nuclear again as the youth leader starts to break up the dart throwing festival. "Okay, okay. That's it. Did everyone get to throw darts at all the sinners they named?" Cheers and whoops of joy erupt. "Great, now take a seat". Reluctantly, the teenagers sit down as the youth leader brings over the dartboard. Without saying a word, he gently pulls out the remaining darts and removes the paper covering the dartboard. Underneath is a picture of Jesus. Silence. It's so sudden that it's like someone just switched off the volume control. The teenagers stare open mouthed at the shredded picture of Jesus hanging off the dartboard. Then one by one, their heads begin to drop, as they look away. As they look inside themselves.

Today, of all days, as we remember where we were and what we were doing ten years ago as hijacked planes crashed into buildings and fields, and the death toll mounted, we too need to look inside ourselves. We will not forget. Forgiveness does not demand that we forget. Forgiveness does not ask us to justify, rationalize, and sweep away the horror of sin or willful acts of hate and violence. However, if we refuse to forgive others, we do not reflect God in Christ Jesus, but a world intent on the downward spiral of violent vengeance. An unforgiving heart is needlessly tethered to those who sin against us. It continues to be wounded and damaged long after the initial hurt. The truth is that forgiveness frees us. Forgiving one another is a sign of God's presence in and to the world. As God's children – Christ's Body – it's imperative that we understand the depth of God's forgiveness for our own sins. It's imperative that we forgive the sins of others to show the face of God's mercy to the world. Forgiveness brings to life healing and reconciliation in Christ's name. Forgiveness is the hope of the world.

It has been said that, "If our greatest need had been information, God would have sent an educator. If our greatest need had been technology, God would have sent us a scientist. If our greatest need had been money, God would have sent us an economist. But since our greatest need was forgiveness, God sent us a Savior" (Max Lucado). Please find the slip of paper included in your worship bulletin this morning. On it is an invitation to seek forgiveness, and to forgive. Please take a moment now to fill it out and fold it up, and then drop it into the offering plate. No one's going to read it. Forgiveness is a gift, part of our freedom in Christ. Experience it and share it today and every day.

Amen.