

**18<sup>th</sup> Week after Pentecost, Proper 19 – Year A – September 14, 2008**  
**Exodus 14:19-31; Psalm 114; Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35**  
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We are going to start with a quiz this morning. I won't be looking for a show of hands, so you can be completely honest with yourself. Which of the following four statements best describes your personal philosophy of forgiveness? Statement (a) "To err is human, to forgive is divine." Statement (b) "Forgive and forget." Statement (c) "And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" (Matthew 6:12). Or statement (d) "Vengeance is sweet." Perhaps I should have added (e) "all of the above." Mostly because you and I are human and the reality is that we are frequently fickle creatures. I can honestly say that I, at least, have exercised my free will through every single one of those options at one time or another in my life. And I may be entirely wrong, but my guess is that many of you have too. The good news is that we are forgiven.

In the Gospel reading for last week, some of the last words Peter and the other disciples hear are these, "whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 18:18). Given Peter's question of our Lord, I have a sneaking suspicion that Peter, on our behalf and on behalf of all disciples, is really looking for Jesus' reassurance. Perhaps in order to smooth out some new wrinkles that have just popped up in his own conscience, knowing full well that he may have loosed a few things that probably should not have been loosed. Peter asks, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?" As many as seven times?" This is when I wish we had the audio version of this conversation. I for one want to hear a note of incredulity in Peter's voice at that point. As many as **seven** times? Jesus' response takes us all by surprise because we keep forgetting that God's thoughts are not our thoughts, nor God's ways our ways. To paraphrase, Jesus tells Peter that our forgiveness must be like God's, without limit.

Then Jesus tells us a story about a king and his slave, and about a slave and his fellow slave. It is a disturbing story. Historically it has been read and taught as an allegorical description of God, as represented by the king in the story. However, if we go on thinking that this is an allegorical depiction of God as the king, and you and I as the slaves then we have some quick explaining to do. What do we make of the incongruity between Jesus' statement about God's bountiful mercy and forgiveness, swiftly followed by the actions of the king in the story who changes his mind about his forgiveness and ends up torturing the unforgiving slave?

Last week we had the Exodus rendition of the murder of firstborns at the first Passover. This week we have the torture of poor slaves in the Gospel of Matthew. We have to stop right here. We have to stop right here because we have to read and hear this story with new eyes and ears. We have to stop right here, because there is a key sentence that unlocks this passage for us. It is this, "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves." Ask yourself what is involved in a comparison. Just as we had in our quiz earlier, there were four options to compare; we might just as easily take two options for comparison, apples and oranges, for example. Or let's take a comparison of men and women. What about looking at a comparison of our left hands versus our right hands. You get the idea. In a comparison there are at least two things being compared one with another. As Matthew has been telling us repeatedly; as St. Augustine describes for us in *The City of God*; as you and I know to be true, there are two competing realities. There is the cultural milieu that describes the day-to-day sphere of existence for many people. Then there is the Kingdom of God. "To err is human, to forgive is divine." This story is not an allegory. It is, contextually, a real life story that Jesus is using to make his point about God's judgment of grace, and the very different economy at work in God's kingdom.

Talents, denarii, accounting, debt, and reckoning: the whole language used here is worldly oriented, and that gives us a big clue that this is an earthly scenario, and not an allegorical representation

of God or God's kingdom. While we don't call the President of the United States king, lord or ruler per se, the basic balance of accounts applies even in the U.S. In theory, the government provides safety, security, and services to the people. In return, we pay our taxes. The scene before us is a king and his chief tax collector; hence, the extremely large amount of money involved. For whatever reason the chief tax collector has been unable to raise the taxes to pay the debt owed to the king. "Forgive and forget" is the king's motto right now, and he waives the taxes due. Scene two. The tax collector meets with one of his own slaves and demands that the slave pays his debt. The amount in question is about three month's wages. Entirely forgetting the maxim of "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors", the tax collector beats up his slave and throws him in prison. Scene three. On hearing this, the king summons his tax collector. He responds in the way that most of us would – he's angry and judgmental. He cannot believe that his subject has not taken his lordly lesson in generosity and beneficence to heart. Therefore, remembering that other old maxim that "vengeance is sweet", he teaches the tax collector another kind of lesson. In interpersonal dynamics, there is always someone around who has the power to hurt us. This is a story of fear, not God's love or grace.

Again, the story Jesus shares shows us very clearly the economic organization and power structures operative in the political systems that we all know. We pay our taxes, and if we don't pay can end up in jail. There is usually no talk of forgiveness on the part of the IRS! The invitation that Jesus extends is to look closely at what it means to live in God's kingdom, where we don't forgive one another just seven times, but seventy-seven times. In God's kingdom, the currency is love, God's judgment is grace, and our debt is paid for us in such a way that all we can offer in return is our sacrifice of thanks and praise to God. It is also a kingdom where there is no room for any of us to think of ourselves more highly than we ought to. You and I are truly equal in God's eyes. It is in loving and serving one another, that we come to understand exactly how *God's* power is made perfect in weakness.

Remember how the circular power dynamic worked out in the story between the king, the tax collector, the slave, the tax collector and the king. It inevitably ends in violence. Violence is not part of God or God's kingdom. Ending this cycle of violence is another aspect of this story that Jesus wants us to understand, because we cannot fulfill our call to further God's kingdom with violence, it is simply not God's way. We already know that the root of the violence is human in origin, but within our humanity what is the source of the violence in this story that Jesus is helping to reveal to us? Violence erupts when the tax collector who is forgiven, fails to forgive his own debtor. In turn, this incites the king to violence against the tax collector. Theologian Stanley Hauerwas has this to say, "We must remember that our first task is not to forgive, but to learn to be the forgiven." If we don't embrace that truth, then our willingness to forgive others amounts to nothing more than a power play and has no Godly foundation. In effect, it is like the forgiveness of the king in the story – the forgiveness that he easily withdrew in yet another demonstration of power. Hauerwas goes on to say, "We fear accepting forgiveness from another because such a gift makes us powerless.... Only by learning to accept God's forgiveness [that is learning to be forgiven] can we acquire the power that comes from learning to give up control."

Ultimately, as we hear in 1 John (4:19) "We love because he first loved us." We forgive because he first forgave us. As usual in God's kingdom, there is a paradox. In faith and trust, you and I give up ourselves, and all the power and control that we think that entails, and what happens? God blesses us. The incredible freedom we gain in giving up our selves to God and accepting God's judgment of grace, love and forgiveness becomes the power of Christ working in us. It is, therefore, always God's power that enables you and me to love our neighbor as ourselves. Just like the king, we could not sustain that in and of ourselves. The good news is that we are forgiven. And so we pray, "Lord forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors."

Amen.