

FREE FOR FREEDOM

Merciful God, your Son came to save us and bore our sins on the cross: may we trust in your mercy and know your love, rejoicing in the righteousness that is ours through Jesus Christ our Lord.

A Collect for Proper 19A, Additional Collects, Common Worship, The Church of England

THE FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Proper 19A: Genesis 50:15-21; Psalm 103:8-13; Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35

SEPTEMBER 17, 2017

ST. MARK'S-IN-THE-VALLEY

EPISCOPAL CHURCH AND PRESCHOOL

Los Olivos, California

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THE GOSPEL READING: MATTHEW 18:15-20

Peter came and said to Jesus, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

"For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' And 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."

Understory

~ Mark Nepo ~

I've been watching stars
rely on the darkness they
resist. And fish struggle with

and against the current. And
hawks glide faster when their
wings don't move.

Still I keep retelling what
happens till it comes out
the way I want.

We try so hard to be the
main character when it is
our point of view that
keeps us from the truth.

The sun has its story
that no curtain can stop.

It's true. The only way beyond
the self is through it. The only
way to listen to what can never
be said is to quiet our need
to steer the plot.

When jarred by life, we might
unravel the story we tell ourselves
and discover the story we are in,
the one that keeps telling us.

Last week I read a description of a minimum security federal prison camp. It has very little in terms of a system to prevent escapes – but doesn't need much because the inmates know that if they escape, they will be sent to a much worse place. They have a lot of freedom to go outdoors when they want and have lots to do from bocce, to racquetball, to sand volleyball, a running track, and more: TV, internet, private showers and a commissary to

supplement the meals that are served. There's even a park along a river where inmates can go to sit and read during the day.

And yet, it is a prison.

I'm wondering if the story we tell ourselves about our lives keeps us in a prison like the one in this description?

And I wonder if we can discover the story we are in?

What we hear in the gospel reading today is meant to jar us, to

unravel the story we habitually tell ourselves.

The poet says: “the only way to listen to what can never be said is to quiet our need to steer the plot.”

Jesus is saying what can never be said by us.

Can we quiet our need to steer the plot?

Of can we be shocked into realizing that our steering of the plot is in only in our thoughts... not in reality. The things we think have locked us up.

What can never be said is that we can (and must) forgive in the way Jesus describes: continually, completely, and in a way that denies, confounds rationality.

Forgive as we are forgiven: utterly, crazily, repeatedly.

And, in many cases, we don't even know what forgiveness is, or that we are harboring grudges against others and against ourselves. The grievances, enmities, bitterness, antipathies, aversions, dislikes, hatreds are so commonplace, so much a part of our personal landscapes, the interior designs, the wallpaper of our minds and hearts that we lose consciousness that they are even

there, that they are part of who we are.

And they are keeping us in prison.

Yes, we have some freedom to move around, to keep ourselves occupied, but not much more. Not really.

Pass the opioids. Or the bomb.

We are irrational about the bad blood and injury we harbor.

The parable Jesus tells reveals the scale of the incoherence of our minds, the foolishness of the plot, the cockamamie point of view we have as we retell the story until it comes out the way we want – the same demented way, time and time again.

In the parable, you can see the servant or slave owed his master 10,000 talents. A talent was the equivalent of 130 pounds of silver in the ancient world, and would take about 15 years to earn. So the king forgives his servant the equivalent of 150,000 years of labor. This almost unimaginable sum is what is forgiven that first servant. The master, in releasing the literally crushing debt, is taking the only course available... this person could never, *ever* repay.

In contrast, this now forgiven man encounters a second servant or slave in the story who owed this man 100 denarii, a denarius being about a day's wage, so 100 days of labor – a comparatively miniscule amount that could, likely, have been repaid, had the debtor been given just a modicum of generosity.

So this first slave is telling and retelling a story about debt and poverty and he cannot hear *any* story of forgiveness – even when *he is the one* who has received the unheard of, inconceivable release.

So in the parable that Jesus tells, *attempting to jar his listeners into awareness*, the man – who had his whole gigantic debt forgiven – is now, instead, apprehended to be tortured until he could pay, which, we know, will now, unquestionably, not happen. And if that didn't *wake up* the people listening to him, Jesus says that everyone who doesn't forgive *from their heart* will be similarly seized and tortured.

We may be shocked at the story – especially the outcome – and the picture of God Jesus uses in this teaching.

But we are *not* so shocked as to change *anything* about who we

are or how we go about our consistently unforgiving ways.

In fact, maybe we won't forgive Jesus for upsetting us with this nasty parable and picture of God.

And, don't overlook that part of the phrase where Jesus says that we are to forgive from our hearts. Ultimately, Jesus wants us to go beyond forgiveness to love.

Have you heard that Jesus said: *love* your enemies. Not "just" forgive....

Doesn't there come a time when we give up what burdens us: a certain view of ourselves, a certain view of those around us, a certain view of events, a certain view of our own personal story, or the story of the world around us – these incarcerating habits of mind, habits that constrict us, maim us, disfigure us? In what we retell time and again, so it is all so familiar, it may not seem all that bad to keep these certain storylines – could be worse....

But the question is not about what we can endure, but what can we *be* as people who are forgiven and forgiving – what, who are we freed to be and do?

God in Christ is offering large

forgiveness that includes us but also everyone and is about a new culture, a new world, the life that lives beyond us and into the future.

But we protest: where is the reciprocity? I want my 100 denarii back! I'll forgive when everyone else forgives (no matter how forgiven we already are by God, by the Universe, by our Source – which we overlook)! I don't want to be a weakling, a patsy, a wimp who lets things go – even if I end up incarcerated.

We rationalize: I'm not ready, I don't need to. And besides, I don't want to forgive this because if I do, it will justify the wrongdoer, give the impression that the wrong they did is okay. I must *maintain* this offense or all the barriers will be down and people like that will run rampant.

And so on, we reason, from our cells.

Pick any past wrong, resentment, or pain – but maybe some form of bigotry. In fact we can let what is past go and not be hampered in the least, in fact truly freed and energized to give ourselves to the new story, and advocate and work for the new creation, the story we are in, the story of love and life that is telling us, the story of God, in which there is no bigotry.

Jesus, judged innocent and killed anyway, now risen as Christ, invites us to move through ourselves to a new point of view, to see ourselves utterly forgiven as we are... and loved – and so, *discovering* the story we are in, we now forgiving and loving: the story God is telling in us, through us, beyond us, individually, together, no matter what.



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