

Vast Forgiveness

Proper 19, Year A, RCL. Matthew 18:21–35. The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost. September 11, 2011. The Episcopal Shared Ministry of Our Saviour, Salem and Trinity, Alliance in the Diocese of Ohio. The Rev'd Jerome H. (Kip) Colegrove.

The story of the ungrateful slave (or servant—the original Greek word can be translated either way) is perhaps Jesus' most vivid teaching on the subject of forgiveness. A slave has mismanaged his king's money to a huge degree and is liable for an enormous shortfall. (Slaves were trusted on that level, sometimes, in the ancient world; they were usually trying to work their way up to freedom.) But the king has mercy when the slave pleads to have the debt forgiven. Now, ten thousand talents represents a mind-boggling amount of money, but for easy comparison let's say a talent is what a person with a good income would make in a year. A denarius is what an ordinary laborer would make in a day. So when the slave who was forgiven ten thousand year's income goes after another slave who owes him a hundred days' income and tells him to pay up or else, the inequity is obvious.

The point is not so much what a nasty piece of work the ungrateful slave turns out to be, but rather how extravagantly generous God is—hence the extravagantly huge amount of the forgiven debt—and how essential it is that we, in our turn, behave according to that extravagantly generous standard God is setting.

The real problems in forgiveness (and reconciliation too, as we'll see in that sermon I've been promising on the subject) are anger and fear, which are usually closely connected. The ungrateful slave might have been angry that his master shamed him by putting him on the spot, and he might have been worried that he still wouldn't have enough money for his lifestyle even after he was forgiven such a huge debt. So he takes it all out on the guy who owes him a few month's income. Shakes him down viciously. Should have treated him magnanimously, but...we fear we'll be taken advantage of, so we circle the wagons and contemplate retaliatory strikes. And we act out our aggressive impulses, sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly, not just to protect ourselves but because it feels good to be doing something fierce and decisive.

Bear in mind that all this operates on the level of kids in a household, countries on a planet, and God...as he interacts, however sweetly, however stormily, with the human race.

The greatest danger in the post-9/11 world is the greatest danger that has always beset human beings, and always will till our Lord returns in glory: that we will fail to take seriously the model of extravagant grace that Almighty God has set as the universal standard governing all reflection, judgment and behavior. The kicker is in the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our sins," we pray to God, adding, as Jesus directed, "*as we forgive those who sin against us.*" (That's from the modern version of the Lord's Prayer in the Book of Common prayer, an option in our worship

that we haven't used much since I've been here, but it's a really good translation of the prayer.)

“Forgive us our sins...as we forgive those who sin against us.” That means just what we're afraid it means—something for us to do that entails risk, effort and transformative change. Forgiveness is a pattern with two important qualities. (1) The pattern is circular, or cyclical. God forgives us, and in turn we forgive others—whether they forgive us or care about us or do anything good, nice or kind to us or not. And then it comes round to where we are again able to receive God's forgiveness. (2) The pattern is proportional. Because God forgives us, we are more able to forgive others. If we do forgive others, we are more able to receive more grace from God. And so on around, with God adding value on every cycle. The whole thing is designed to deepen the relationship of love between God and his broken creatures—specifically, us. It is a pattern of healing. But if we break the pattern—refusing, like the slave in the parable we heard this morning, to forgive someone in the same way he had been forgiven—even though the law was on his side, even though he may have needed the money, even though the debtor may not himself have been a nice person, all the usual excuses—then we are worse off than if we had not followed the divine example. We have put the breaks on God's grace. Tossed it out the window. Pretended it didn't matter as much as it always does.

Notice a very important bad effect of treating God's grace this way. It damages the human community in general, not just the people involved in the particular

forgiveness transaction (as I like to call such things). In the parable, the other servants, slaves, members of the household or business, are appalled by what their colleague has done. If this is the permitted or encouraged pattern, who will be able to trust anybody, get along with anybody? If the response to generosity is to be a crueller and more grasping tightwad, you get...

You get a graceless world. You get hell, in the end. Selfishness augmented by violence, the war of all against all.

This is why circling the wagons is not the defining pattern of world affairs, from a Christian point of view. The defining pattern is the much more challenging struggle to act honorably around the campfires of all parties involved. That requires the cycle of forgiveness (and, where possible, reconciliation) to be the foundation that holds up the whole structure of interaction among individuals and groups who possess free will and moral judgment. That would be us.

And again, this is so because of the nature of God, in whose image we creatures with free will and moral judgment are made. Indeed, it is a staple of Christian theology that the nature of the Most Holy and Blessed Trinity infuses all of creation with the divine nature at its core, and all attempts to act counter to that nature will ultimately prove to be vanity and striving after wind.

Ultimately. But right now we are in the soup of a thousand thousand dilemmas, distractions, distresses,

and disfigurements. How shall we decide the next moral question that pops up in front of us?

According to the grace that has been abundantly poured out for us through the Cross of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Give as we have received, grace upon grace, as a planet, as a nation, as a town, as a parish, as a person. Vastly generous, not *to* a fault, but *because* our fault, our debt, our unbearable shortfall, is made whole in God.