

**Sermon Preached September 14, 2014  
Year A, Proper 19  
St. John's Episcopal Church  
Beverly Farms, Massachusetts  
The Rev. Stephanie Chase Bradbury**

In the name of God: Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Amen.

There once was a church where “The Sunday sermon was entitled ‘Forgive Your Enemies.’ Toward the end of the service, the preacher asked his congregation, ‘How many of you have forgiven your enemies?’ About half held up their hands. He then repeated his question. As it was past lunchtime, this time about 80 percent held up their hands. He then repeated his question again. At which point all responded, except one small, elderly lady. ‘Mrs. Jones?’” inquired the preacher, ‘Are you not willing to forgive your enemies?’ ‘I don't have any.’ she replied, smiling sweetly. ‘Mrs. Jones, That is very unusual. How old are you?’ ‘Ninety-three,’ she replied. ‘Oh Mrs. Jones, what a blessing and a lesson to us all you are. Would you please come down in front of this congregation and tell us all how a person can live ninety-three years and not have an enemy in the world.’ The little sweetheart of a lady tottered down the aisle, faced the congregation, and said ‘I outlived the old hags.’”<sup>1</sup>

Today Jesus tells another parable to describe the Kingdom of God. This week it is about the importance of forgiveness. As you may remember from my preaching series this summer about the parables, there are several things to bear in mind. The Kingdom of God starts in this life, it is not simply about life after death.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://jokes.ochristian.com/Pastor/Forgive\\_Your\\_Enemies.shtml](http://jokes.ochristian.com/Pastor/Forgive_Your_Enemies.shtml)

These parables are meant to show us how to begin to inhabit the Kingdom in right now. Parables are also not easy to understand. They are not simple moral tales. They often contain odd components that are designed to make us wrestle with the story.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew, Jesus is in Capernaum with his disciples. In last week's reading he discusses with them the necessity of confronting those individuals in the church who sin. Jesus gives instructions for how this is to be done in order to maintain the health and stability of the community. This week's reading is really a continuation of that theme. How do we maintain the community health and wellbeing?

The passage begins when Peter approaches Jesus and asks him a question, "if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Peter felt he was on pretty solid ground here. The rabbis at the time had guidelines that a person should be forgiven three times. Most days it's hard for me to forgive more than once, if that! I'm with Peter. Seven sounds generous. But then Jesus makes the outrageous statement, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." What? That's crazy! Are we supposed to be doormats? And the full reality is, Jesus doesn't literally mean forgiving seventy-seven times. It's a figure of speech meant to indicate that we are to forgive forever. There is no limit to the number of times we are to forgive someone.

Jesus then tells the parable of the unforgiving servant. In it a King wishes to settle accounts with his slaves. One slave is brought before him who owes ten thousand talents. To our

ears we hear “10,000 dollars,” and it sounds like a lot, but something that could realistically be paid off.

The truth is, one talent is estimated to be the equivalent of 15 years wages. If you consider the annual salary of someone making minimum wage in our country is \$15,000/year, that means the ten thousand talents that the slave owed was worth about 2.25 billion dollars!<sup>2</sup> It was a ridiculous sum of money. Jesus was using hyperbole to make a point. The debt this slave was under was ludicrous and completely beyond his ability to pay. But when the slave asked for more time, the King had pity on him and made the extraordinary gesture to forgive the debt.

Yet that same day as he left the king’s court, the slave met another slave who owed him money. In today’s currency the amount owed by this second slave was the equivalent of about \$3,700. Real money, but so far below the \$2.25 Billion he had owed the king, that it was practically nothing.

This second slave said the exact same words the first one said to the King about asking for more time, but the first slave seemed to have completely forgotten the mercy showed him, and instead sent the second slave, with the much smaller debt, to prison. When it was discovered what he had done, the first slave was sent to be tortured until he paid his \$2.25 billion debt.

The obvious lesson to be drawn from this is that God forgives us such an incredible number of shortcomings, mistakes, hurts, and sins of ours that for us to sit in judgment on the tiny infractions others commit against us, is unjust. We are to show mercy and forgiveness to others just as God shows mercy and forgiveness to us.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://lectionarylab.com/2014/09/08/year-a-the-fourteenth-sunday-after-pentecost-september-14-2014/>

It is important to note that the anger of holding a grudge is as painful as having the guilt of having done something wrong. Both sides are in pain. There is an incredible release of pain and energy when we forgive and are forgiven. Individuals and the community are healed. Every one of us desires forgiveness from someone. Every one of us owes it to someone else.

“In his short story “Capital of the World,” Ernest Hemingway tells about a Spanish father who wanted to be reconciled with his runaway son. The despairing father missed his son so much that he placed an advertisement in the local newspaper. The advertisement read simply, “Paco, meet me at the Hotel Montana at noon on Tuesday. All is forgiven! Love, Papa.” But Paco is a very common name in Spain—and when the father went to the hotel the next day, there were eight hundred young men named Paco waiting for their forgiving fathers!”<sup>3</sup>

The world is waiting to be healed with the balm of forgiveness.

But remember when looking at parables to look at the odd components. What is weird or inconsistent? That is where the deep reflections lie. For instance in today’s parable, looking at the outrageous value of the talents gives us an insight into how Jesus understands the mercy of God, how it is abundant beyond measure. At the same time there seems to be an inconsistency. If the King is so merciful and we are to forgive seventy seven times, why did the King not have mercy a second time? Why did he send the slave to be tortured? And even stranger, why does Jesus say God will do that to us? Send us to be tortured? That sounds neither forgiving or like good news.

This seeming inconsistency is a result of our free will.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://thejourney.net.org/ForgivenessJustice1/ForgivenessGod/Stories/PacosStory/tabid/182/Default.aspx>

The slave had the choice to live in one of two worlds: a world of debts and judgment or a world of mercy. When the slave was brought before the king, he was living in a world of judgments and debts. The King had lent him 10,000 talents, the slave was expected to return them. He understood this and expected this. The slave did not ask for a release from his debts, merely more time to pay them off. But the king, in his pity, decided to offer the slave a whole new world, a world of mercy. He forgave the debts.

Imagine what a world of forgiveness would look like? Remember that just last week we spoke of the importance of speaking up to people when they sin. Loving confrontation is needed when one sins, but today's lesson points out that the second step in that healing, after loving confrontation, is forgiveness.

To live in a community with loving confrontation and forgiveness would be to be in harmony and peace with all. We only need to look at the world around us to see the consequences of a lack of forgiveness and revenge. In contrast, the King offers a world of mercy to the slave. But when the first slave demanded the second slave pay his debts and then threw him in prison, the first slave was rejecting that world of forgiveness and continuing to live in the world of debt and judgment. By sending him to be tortured, the king was merely allowing the first slave to live in his world of choice.

So too, when we don't forgive, God does not send us to be tortured, we send ourselves. God only gives us what we ask for. When we don't forgive, we ourselves are choosing to live in a world of debt and judgment, and that is torture.

The consequences of not forgiving others is that we ourselves are not forgiven. Without forgiveness, relationships remain broken, pain is multiplied, and life moves in cycles of sin and revenge. In this parable, Jesus shows us the consequences of our choice, not as a threat, but as a way to make clear to us the world we create with that choice. When we, like the slave, chose not to live in the world of forgiveness, even when God so lavishly offers it to us, we create our own hell.

When we forgive, it is a gift not only to the one who has sinned against us, but a gift to us, and a healing for the community. There is a reason that the foundational prayer Jesus teaches us, that we say every Sunday, has the words, “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” We pray every week to live in the world of forgiveness.

God is like the merciful king; she offers us forgiveness over and over again! In staggering abundance, beyond belief, she forgives and forgives every mistake and error. Jesus invites us to live in the Kingdom of God, starting right now, by imitating the Almighty in forgiving others and ourselves. Amen.