July 1, 2018 Text: Matthew 18:21-35 “Parable of the Unforgiving Servant”

Where’s my eraser? This week’s study text is one I’d like to take out of the Bible. Is Jesus saying that God gets so mad with me when I do not forgive someone that God punishes me by putting me into some kind of spiritual prison (Matthew 18:34)? That certainly does not give me much wiggle room for handling someone who has offended me.

But, deep down, I know that Jesus has described exactly what happens when I hang onto a grudge, when I remain bitter at some mistreatment, when I refuse to let go of resentment. When I refuse to forgive, it is I, not my antagonist, who is imprisoned. In a sense, if I do not forgive, I have given a victory to the one who harmed me. It is I who suffers with residual feelings, not the other person.

In no way is this suggesting that one needs to stay in a relationship that is harmful. Forgiveness is not the same thing as saying “Hit me again.” God forgives me for my multiple sins, but it is not God’s will that I continue to sin. Just because I forgive someone does not mean that I want that person to continue to harm me.

I looked up ἀφίξειν in a big Greek-English dictionary. (That’s the word that has been translated “forgive.”) The dictionary gave multiple layers to the word: send forth, cry, forgive, forsake, lay aside, leave, let alone, let be, let go, omit, put away, remit, suffer, yield up.

 Forgiveness has a lot of dimensions!

At minimum, this story that Jesus told tells us to consider how God has forgiven us when we face a decision about how we do/don’t forgive another. God expects repentance, but there is a provenient grace given that makes that repentance possible. What grace can I give to someone who has hurt me?

Maybe I need to look a little more for that eraser.

What Someone Else Has Said:

“In Of Mice and Misty (Thomas Nelson), Jen Hatmaker has written: “Forgiveness rarely ends in a one-and-done decision. Very few decide one day to forgive and never have to revisit that release. In most cases, it is a process that takes months and sometimes years of work, and just when you think you have laid an offense down, it creeps back up in memory and you have to battle it anew. Just because this work is stubborn does not mean that you are failing or will never be free. Forgiveness is a long road in the same direction.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Lord, You have forgiven me…”


In this week’s lesson, Jesus is not criticizing the religious leaders because they have been spreading false teachings. There is nothing wrong with what they teach, but Jesus accuses them of not practicing what they preach (Matthew 23:3). Ooops! I prefer to be judged on whether or not my teaching is true, but our Lord looks at how I do (or do not) live out those teachings.

As Jesus continues his coaching, He says these religious leaders do the small stuff, but ignore the more important things (Matthew 23:23a). But, note! Jesus does not say stop doing the small stuff! (Matthew 23:23b). Ooops! I prefer to focus my time and energy on big, important matters—justice, peace, faith (Matthew 23:23a)—and not pay much attention to the little things: tithing, taking a dish to a sick neighbor, stepping across the aisle to greet a newcomer. Our Lord says we are to continue the small practices, but not at the expense of the larger picture.

Last September, I mailed a booklet to my sister in Greensboro. It did not arrive. It did not arrive. It did not arrive. Then, a little more than a month after I had shipped the package, I got a letter from the Postal Service. It indicated that my big envelope had arrived, but that there was nothing in it. Somewhere along the way, the book had come out. That seems to be what Jesus is describing: there are all of the appearances of faithful living, but it is only the outside wrapping. The book itself—the righteous living itself—is missing. (Matthew 23:25).

Verse 24 is based on an ancient practice of filtering a beverage by pouring it through a cloth. Any tiny pieces of trash or ants or gnats would get caught in the cloth, so the drink was clear to consume. Jesus makes a joke, using the humor of exaggeration. Can you imagine being concerned enough about good water that you get rid of a goat, but you miss the camel floating in the drink? Of course, it is a ludicrous picture and reminds us that Jesus enjoyed a good laugh, in this case at the expense of the Pharisees and scribes. Surely He is not talking about us!

What Someone Else Has Said:

In Joseph Girzone’s novel Joshua: A Parable for Today (Touchstone, Simon and Schuster), there is this scene: “Joshua shook his head as they walked away, talking excitedly all the way up the street. As he watched he could see the long-flowing robes of Pharisees and scribes. Their mentality was the same, the only setting was different—basically good people, but narrow and undeveloped, who must ultimately destroy what they cannot understand.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Open my ears, Lord, that I may hear when You are speaking to me…”


Jesus told this story (Luke 18:1-8) to encourage the disciples keep on praying without getting disappointed with God’s timing. If a grumpy judge (Luke 18:5) eventually responds to a widow’s repeated request, surely we can count on God to do as well! (Luke 18:7) when we pray continuously.

But, after making that point, Jesus ends the parable by asking a question: “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth” (Luke 18:8)? That’s a good question now some two thousand years after our Lord asked it. Are we tired of waiting? Have we given up on our Lord’s return? Do we pray our prayers without any real expectation?

Maybe God has answered our prayer, but we don’t recognize it because it is not the answer we expected…or wanted. When I was about ten years old, I was going to have a birthday party. I remembered that not long before I had been to another birthday party and this fellow I knew (I won’t call him by name because there may still be some folks in Siler City who would know him!) who had given a beautiful desk lamp as his birthday gift at that party. So, even though we were not particularly good friends, I invited him to my party. After all, I felt I could make good use of a desk lamp! He came to the party. He brought a gift. It was a belt, hardly the gift I wanted. I mentioned all this to my mother.

My mother used that occasion to teach me a ton about the inappropriate-ness of trying to use others for our own satisfaction. She helped me understand the value of appreciating what I have, instead of bemoaning what I don’t have. She spoke of some hardship my belt-giving friend’s family’s business was going through, so that I came to realize that I did not always know what life pressure made someone do what they did.

Come to think of it, I got much more light from my mother’s insights than I would ever have gotten from a desk lamp. I believe I got a good answer when I got that gift of a belt, but I did not recognize it until continued on page 2
Mother helped me learn some valuable life lessons. God’s timing is better than ours. Jesus teaches us to keep on seeking, keep on asking, keep on praying, because God is going to give the answer right.

What Someone Else Has Said:
Rod Dreher (The Benedict Option,) has written: “The Apostle Paul told the church in Thessalonica to pray without ceasing. Benedictines consider their entire lives to be an attempt to fulfill this command...prayer is maintaining an unflawing awareness of the divine presence and doing all things with Him in mind.”


The images of the kingdom in this week’s study text are of a banquet (Luke 13:29). Who gets in and who is left out? That is a good question for each congregation to ask itself as it gathers for the Meal that anticipates and participates in God’s kingdom. Who is missing from the Communion Table? Why are they missing?

This teaching is one that Jesus offers as he “traveled through cities and villages...making his way to Jerusalem” (Luke 13:22). Because so much happens in Jerusalem, there is some temptation to miss what happens elsewhere. If we become accustomed to encountering God only in certain ways, in certain places, at certain times, we may well miss our Lord’s presence in the ordinary.

The question that is asked of Jesus (Luke 13:23) is a “how many” kind of question. The person who asked the question wondered how many would be saved for the kingdom. Jesus does not answer with the predetermined, predestined number. He does not answer with “how many” but with “how.”

The “how” is to use the “narrow gate” (Luke 13:24). This is the gate of steadfast faith. This is the gate of tough moral decisions. This is the gate that is open unless “the owner gets up and shuts the door” (Luke 13:25). In other words, we don’t have to push and shove to get in through the narrow gate. The gate is open as long as the owner recognizes the one at the door (Luke 13:25).

Cyril of Alexandria (mostly fifth century) commented that Luke 13:30 (“...the last will be first and the first will be last”) was to let the Jewish community know that the gate is now open not just to the Jews, but also to the Gentiles. The Gentiles seem to be “latecomers” as people of God, but it is not too late. East. West. North. South. The usual ways we have of dividing up people won’t work. Folks will come from all backgrounds, locales, and traditions, and will still eat at the table in God’s kingdom (Luke 13:29). Perhaps an open Communion Table is a good way to anticipate that fullness of God’s invitation.

What Someone Else Has Said:
In Convictions (Harper One), Marcus Borg has said: “Importantly, ‘the kingdom of God’ was not about an afterlife, about how to get to heaven, but about the transformation of life here on earth...Every time we pray the Lord’s Prayer...we pray, ‘Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth, as it already is in heaven.’”

Prayer:
As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Lord Jesus, I want to share in Your kingdom life. Show me the gate of faith and trust...”


One thing is clear. The man who planned this dinner party wanted as many people there as possible (Luke 14:16, 22-23). This is a generous man who reaches out to the seemingly least deserving to fill up his party tables. These last ones who come are surely there only by the freely given grace of the host. Hmm. That’s sounds familiar. I am hearing an echo of a hymn: “He said, ‘Freely, freely, you have received, freely, freely give. Go in my name and because you believe, others will know that I live.” (Hymn 389, The United Methodist Hymnal)

Jesus tells this story to teach us about God and the word is that God is a generous God. God also looks for a “yes” to his invitation.

When I look at the various excuses that people in this account gave for turning down the chance to be at the party, I think “Amateurs!” Yes, we are better at excuse-making because we are more subtle, more nuanced in turning away from what God wants us to be. “I’d love to teach that class, but I’m just not well read.” “Of course, I think we should help out at the urban ministry food pantry, but I don’t want to deny that privilege to others.” “I would witness to my faith, but I think that is somebody everyone has to decide for herself or himself.”

Just before these selected verses, Jesus has been telling someone not to invite a dinner those who could repay him; invite those who cannot repay him (Luke 14:12-14). Most of the time, when I attend a church I see mostly people who look like me. Have others not felt welcomed? Have I failed to invite “the other”? Am I quicker to smile at those who can “do their share”?

Then, after making that point, Jesus tells this story about the man who extended his party invitation to the highways and hedges (Luke 14:23). Some ancient commentators suggest that the one who is sent to bring in the lost and the least is Christ Himself. That certainly is the spirit of the Master; those are the kinds of people with whom He Himself ate (Matthew 9:10, Mark 2:13-17, Luke 5:30).

What time is the party? Are you going?

What Someone Else Has Said:
Archbishop Rowan Williams has written (Tokens of Trust, Westminster John Knox): “God is to be trusted as we would trust a loving parent, whose commitment to us is inexhaustible, whose purposes for us are unfailingly generous; someone whose life is the source of our life, and who guarantees that there is always a home for us.”

Prayer:
As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Grace-giving God, I hear Your invitation to eat with You. Hear my ‘Yes!’ Hear my ‘Yes!’”

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On Independence Day and Every Day

To our soldiers - thank you for your sacrifice.