

The Rev. Mary Haggerty
St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church – Florissant, MO
Proper 19, September 13, 2020
Matthew 18:21-35

The parable that we heard in this morning's Gospel isn't found in any of the other Gospels. It is unique to Matthew. The sentiment of forgiveness and teachings about forgiveness run through all the gospels. But this particular story is only found in Matthew's Gospel. And it's found at the end of a discourse about community life. The discourse is triggered by the question in the very beginning of the chapter, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Isn't that always the question? Who is the best and the brightest? The richest? The strongest? The one who holds the power. Jesus' surprising reply sets the tone for the rest of the chapter. He tells them that unless they turn and become like little children, they will not even enter the kingdom of heaven. In other words, no sense worrying about your place in the kingdom when you start with questions like that!

The community of Jesus is built on an entirely different set of values. Matthew is speaking to a community that would grow into the church. He recognizes the danger that a structured community in the world tends to take its values from the other structures around it. This chapter is meant to ensure that those values all around the emerging Christian community don't smother the values of Jesus.

In the community of Jesus, it is the weak who are especially treasured. Insignificant people, little children, are not to be exploited or ignored but are to be received as Jesus himself. The lost are to be sought out and rejoiced over when they are reconciled with the community. Last week we heard from Matthew that restoring broken relationships is to be done with care and with the best interests of all parties in mind. When that restoration can't be done and a member

must be excluded, it isn't a final judgement. A community built on the values of Jesus is one that is always seeking to restore the lost.

Now this is a lot to ask. Does Jesus really mean that we have to love others to such an extreme? Haven't we all wanted to ask that question: "How far do we really have to take this?" Well, good old Peter asks the question that no one else will ask! And Jesus' answer isn't really an answer. It shows that the question itself is misdirected. Forgiveness isn't a math problem, it's a way of life. Forgiveness is part and parcel of the Kingdom of God. It's not a choice. We want it to be and that's at the heart of Peter's question. When can I stop? How much is enough? But for Jesus, forgiveness isn't quantifiable. It's a way of being, a way of living and loving. It is the way of Christ and if we want to follow him then it has to be our way as well.

But let's not get confused about what forgiveness means. It doesn't mean that we deny the pain of a hurtful or heinous act. It doesn't mean that we excuse the wrongness or tolerate what is unjust or abusive. Forgiveness doesn't mean that we deny the wrong that was done - It means that we are released from it. We are set free from the hold it has over us. Imagine the servant who had an impossible debt, one that he could never repay. I picture him bent under the weight of it, with a wrinkled forehead and a slow step, unable to move forward. The king set him free. He didn't just release a bit of pressure and give him more time. The servant didn't dare ask for more than that. But the king graciously gave it all to him. Total freedom. Release from what bound him.

The scandal is that the servant forgot who he was – that he was the forgiven one. Instead, he held on to the pain of his debt, his resentment that he had gotten to that point, his fear that he might become indebted again. He dealt with his fellow servant, who owed him far less than he had owed to the king, out of his wounds instead of out of the freedom that the king had granted

him. The parable is dramatic. When the king hears what the forgiven servant has done he is outraged. He banishes him to his own ways. But I wonder if the king is also heartbroken that his gift was rejected.

This brings us back to the beginning of this whole discourse about the kingdom of God. Jesus says we must be like the little children. Children can be unruly. They speak out of turn and they make messes. But a child will always receive a gift. Children haven't learned that they aren't worthy of gifts, they haven't been taught that gifts have strings attached, that they will require payback. Children are free to delight in the gifts given to them.

Forgiveness is a gift. It doesn't originate in us. It begins with God. This is what the servant didn't understand. That it wasn't about him. It was about God. It was about receiving the gift of forgiveness and mercy and living his life out of that. Forgiveness is the gift that God freely offers to us. Mercy is at the heart of God's love for us. I think our resistance to forgiveness is rooted in our resistance to believe in God's merciful, forgiving, all-encompassing love for us. It's a gift that seems too good to be true. But it is true! It is the message of Jesus in this whole discourse. Life with God is a life of freedom, mercy, right relationships.

None of this is to say that forgiveness is easy or that there is anything magical about it. There is no easy path to forgiveness. It takes time and it takes work, work that cannot and should not be rushed. If we are to grow in our ability to be a forgiving people, we have to go back to the well again and again. We have to sit with God, the giver of all gifts, and allow God to love us, to hold us, to forgive us, to delight in us. We have to crawl into the lap of The Divine and rest like little children.

That is my prayer for all of us this week. That we may take the time to sit in the lap of God. In silence. To receive the gift of God's merciful, abounding love. To take it deep within our hearts. I pray that we may remember who we are and whose we are. As we accept the gift of God's love and mercy deep within us, may it move us to be people of forgiveness and mercy.