

Gospel reflections

Matthew 18:21-35

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant

²¹ Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?"²² Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times seven".

²³ "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants.

²⁴ As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him.²⁵ Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

²⁶ "At this the servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.'²⁷ The servant's master took pity on him, cancelled the debt and let him go.

²⁸ "But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded.

²⁹ "His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.'

³⁰ "But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt.³¹ When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

³² "Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to.³³ Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?'³⁴ In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

³⁵ "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

Just last week I was reading an opinion piece about the value of excluding or suspending students from school due to inappropriate behaviour. The purpose of exclusion and its effectiveness were both queried. Quite rightly one of the first questions raised was whether exclusion made a positive difference to the excluded student; the evidence suggests it does not. Another key issue that might arise for staff in Lutheran schools is the role of grace and forgiveness in such situations. The emphasis of this week's gospel reading on forgiveness was therefore a timely message.

The parable of the unforgiving servant is introduced through Peter's seemingly sensible question; 'Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?'

It *seems* sensible because it is a question from a worldly perspective. It is human to want to know just where the boundaries lie. Peter is effectively asking what are the limits? It is the answer to this sort of question that instinctively we want to know.

The answer that Jesus gives, however, is radical. It is not the answer this world wants to know. Forgiveness never ends, 'not seven times, but seventy-seven times seven' he says, and that's hard to understand and even harder to do. It is through the parable that Jesus provides an explanation about the difference between the ways of God and the ways of the world.

When Jesus begins the parable, the world of the King initially appears as one where the business of the world has its place. It is a world where accounts are created and payments are made. The outcome for those unable to meet their debt is dire. If we were to take a legal view of the debt owed by the King's servant, the debt should be repaid or suffer the consequences. Similarly, the person who owed the debt to the King's servant should also, in the eyes of the law, repay that debt. However, God's way is not the way of the law.

The King forgives a debt so great that one lifetime would probably not be enough to make the repayment. The King's servant has begged for mercy and he has been rewarded in a way that he could never have expected. He knows he has a duty to repay his debt. He knows the King has a right to demand it. He also knows his only hope is for the king to be merciful and most unexpectedly the King mercifully forgives his debt. However, despite this it does not change the nature of the King's servant. He has been forgiven much but cannot forgive a much smaller debt to one who owes him and demands what he sees as his right. This is not the response the King expects. If he has forgiven, so too must his servant. As his servant is unable, or unwilling, to do so he is tortured, punished until he can pay back what he owes.

Martin Luther, in reference to this parable, explains that the 'Gospel or kingdom of God is nothing else than a state or government, in which there is nothing but forgiveness of sins ... there is no demand for rights and dues, but all is pure forgiveness, pardon and giving'. This is a parable about forgiveness for both the King's servant and his fellow servant. This is because this is what Christ has done for each of us. It is also what he continues to do. As often as we fall down, he reaches out with grace again and again.



Reflecting on the 16th century painting by Jan van Hemessen may provide insight into the radical nature of forgiveness.

What do the facial expressions of each individual imply? What might the ledgers, coins and other articles on the desk symbolise? What is the meaning of the scene within the main picture? Where is God in this all of this? Where might we be in this picture?

Prayer:

Merciful Father, we thank you again for the way in which you pour out your grace on us. Help us to also share that same generosity with love to those around us and to praise you for this most precious gift. We ask this in the name of Jesus, Amen.