

19 April 2020 – Proper 19

Genesis 50:15-21 · Romans 14:1-12 · Matthew 18:21-35

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This is a difficult parable that Jesus has given us today. I admit when I was first looking at the preaching rota, I saw today's lectionary and thought "oh boy, I don't even want to try to preach about that"...and then, much later, thought "maybe that means you *should* preach about that."

So I started to think about that initial reaction, what that was about. It's not a difficult question: entering into this story, as Jesus suggests, in the role of the slave touches a deep place of guilt and fear – emotions that live in the body as much as the mind, that twist the stomach and raise the blood pressure and make you want to go hide under a rock.

We can mean two different things when we say "guilt", although they are related: one is this feeling in our body that's close neighbors with shame and fear and regret, and the other is the metaphysical "debt" that we run up through sin. This metaphor of sin as debt has deep roots in our culture. It is helpful in that it conveys a sense of weight and obligation. But it can lead us astray if we start to think sin is a debt we can pay back. That would be fair, right? We should pay back our debts. But as I keep saying, God is not fair, and wants to give us something for nothing.

What is the process that went awry in this parable? What should have happened? It's not actually "forgive and you will be forgiven" – although we know that's true as well. In this case, it's "be forgiven and you will forgive". The man isn't asked to forgive his debtor first; *all* he needs to do to obtain the king's forgiveness is ask. It's not hard to earn God's mercy; we already have it. The hard part is accepting it, which often means forgiving ourselves.

This isn't the only interpretation of this story; but when I put myself in his shoes, I wonder if he found it so difficult to forgive his fellow-slave's debt because he still hadn't forgiven himself. Perhaps, even after the king forgave him, he was still so full of guilt over running up such a catastrophic debt that all he could see in the other man was a reflection of his own failure; and so in condemning himself, he also condemned the other, laying guilt upon guilt.

Anger is important because it often points to injustice. But anger can also grow out of proportion, and lie to us, and become the source of great evil; and as the letter of James tells us, our anger does not produce God's righteousness (James 1:20). Justice does. Likewise, guilt is important because it often points to sin. But it can grow out of

proportion, and lie to us, and become the source of great evil. Our guilt does not produce God's righteousness. Repentance does.

That's not to say it's bad to be sorry for our sins; but we can't make an idol out of our own sinfulness, which is deceptively easy to do. Our sin is known territory: it may be miserable, but we know our place in it. What we don't necessarily know is who we will become as creatures transformed by forgiveness and grace. We are asked to change, to rise, to come out of the prison of our guilt: to be forgiven and spread forgiveness, to be loved and spread love, to be freed and spread freedom. We don't need to atone and fix everything beforehand; this is *how* we atone and fix what we can. It asks us for creativity, boldness, audacity. It invites us into confidence: to act confidently is, literally, to act "with faith". Accepting forgiveness is a leap of faith.

That's also not to say that we should pretend everything is okay when it's not. Sin does tend to produce suffering that can't be easily erased. It's messy. And all we can do is tackle that mess with honesty and responsibility. Think about when someone has wronged you: what do you want? Perhaps an apology, a change in behavior, restitution, understanding, compassion; but not guilt. If we find ourselves wanting someone else to feel guilty, we've fallen into the trap this parable warns us against.

As a concrete example, one of the things that can happen in racial justice movements – especially on places like college campuses where a lot of people are figuring this stuff out for the first time – is white people getting so mired in guilt over their own complicitness in racist systems that they spend more time talking about how guilty they are than they spend working to fix things. Guilt does not produce righteousness. Justice and compassion and repentance do.

Repentance isn't feeling guilty. Repentance is thinking again, moving forward, changing; it may be long, hard work, but in the end it leads us to confidence and love in God, and to become people who radiate that confidence and love out to others.

Being in right relation to others, to ourselves, and to God is all interlinked. The man in Jesus' parable was out of right relation with his fellow-slave, unable to forgive him, perhaps because he was out of right relation with himself; and that inevitably put him out of right relation with God, which is a torturous place to be. If we insist on a world that runs on sin and debt, that is what we will receive. If we accept a world that runs on forgiveness and compassion, it's already there for us.

Sometimes practicing compassion for others helps us to extend it to ourselves. Sometimes we start with compassion for ourselves that then flows out into our

relationships with others. It's all of a piece, and it always starts with compassion from God. Sin and guilt are temporary. Mercy and compassion are eternal. Our lasting responsibility isn't to our sin but to the image of God in us; to be conformed more and more to confidence, faithfulness, truth, and joy. What matters is not so much what we need to be forgiven for, but what forgiveness transforms us into; and that is what transforms and redeems the whole world.