

“As We Forgive?”

September 14, 2008

Matthew 18:23-35

Romans 14:1-12

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Recently I was driving in town and saw one of those company-owned trucks that had a slogan on the side that caught my attention. The slogan on the side of the truck was only three words: “We Kill Bugs.” You probably can imagine what kind of company truck that was, but before you jump to conclusions just think—it might have been a pharmaceutical company truck. As you might imagine, it was an exterminator company truck. That’s a pretty good slogan for an exterminator, isn’t it?

Have you thought about what slogan we might have for the church? Some people who have had an unpleasant experience in church might say an appropriate slogan for the church is, “We kill people, or we at least make them wish they were dead.” We can be so self-righteous and judgmental at times, can’t we? If I were to choose a slogan for the church it would be even simpler than the slogan on the side of the truck. It would have only two words: “We forgive.” That would be a pretty good slogan for the church, wouldn’t it?

Has there ever been a time when forgiveness has been more needed? This past week some of you might have seen the ceremony in New York City that honored those who were killed seven years ago on 9-11. John McCain and Barack Obama were in New York City symbolizing the fact they were putting politics aside for at least a day. They were there at the site of the World Trade Center. Have you heard the story about why those buildings and even a memorial has not been built? It is a classic example of problems with our government: building permits that have not been granted and unions that are fighting each other. Now we have this open scar in the middle of New York City which symbolizes another scar, perhaps. It’s another kind of scar which can be healed only by forgiveness, when we as a nation forgive those who were responsible for what happened on that day.

As individuals, surely there has never been a greater time when we need to forgive and be forgiven. There are relationships that are scarred and broken, relationships and persons who can be healed only by forgiveness. In our scripture lesson today, Jesus talks about forgiveness. Anytime you see a word like we have at the beginning of our scripture you know that something else has just hap-

pened. Jesus says this, "For this reason." In some versions the word is "Therefore," referring back to the sentences that just took place before our scripture reading today.

You remember from last Sunday the lesson about Simon Peter coming to Jesus and saying "How many times do I need to forgive? More than three as the Rabbis taught? As many as seven?" Jesus said, "Not seven, but 77 or seventy times seven." In other words, until you lose count because God cares more about mercy than math.

Then Jesus tells this strange parable that is hard for us to understand. If you will this morning, I want you to take your bulletin and write down a couple of words. The first word I'd like you to write down is the word "talent." Often we confuse the word "talent" with how we use the word today, one who is talented, one who is talented musically and shares that gift or talent. This "talent" was a measure of money. Some biblical scholars tell us that this talent might have been worth as much as 15 years' wages. We don't know exactly the dollar amount, but the amount usually applied to a talent was \$1,000. So beside the word "talent," write \$1,000.

Now write the word "denarius." Again, we're not sure about the exact amount of money a denarius was worth. It might have been a day's wage. So a talent is 15 years' wages and a dinereas is a day's wage. If an amount were assigned to a denarius, it would be about 20 cents. So beside the word denarius, write 20 cents. A talent is worth \$1,000, a denarius is worth 20 cents. Now then, the slave owed the king 10,000 talents. That's an astronomical sum even today: $\$10,000 \times \$1,000 = \$10 \text{ million}$.

Parables exaggerate. They attract us by their vividness or strangeness. This is a strange story indeed. \$10 million, and here's a place where you may leave the sanctuary at this time. Is anyone present this morning who is \$10 million in debt? Raise your hand if you are \$10 million in debt. If you're \$10 million in debt you are excused now. You don't have to listen to the rest of the sermon. Most of us can't even imagine that, can we? Here's what I think Matthew is trying to say in this parable. Remember, Jesus said "The kingdom of God is like this." In other words, you owe God \$10 million and the other person owes you \$20. You don't forgive that person, yet you expect God to forgive you.

Have you ever thought about what you owe to God? Someone might say, "Well, I owe God my life. I owe God everything I have, all of my physical possessions, my family, my friends, but even that is not enough. What dollar value do you place on God's son? That's the debt that we all owe God.

It is not enough to say, "Well, mercy produces mercy. If we receive God's

mercy, we will be merciful.” This parable tells us that’s not so. It’s harder than that and it’s more important than that. This past week I read over the sermon I preached on September 16, 2001. That was the Sunday following 9-11. In that sermon, I quoted what a minister had said at the memorial service at National Cathedral. One minister in his prayer said this, “Lord, give us your wisdom and strength so that we do not become the evil we deplore.” Do we all need to pray that prayer? “Lord, give us your wisdom and strength so that we do not become the evil we deplore.”

Forgiveness is hard work. It was Gandhi who said “The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is an attribute of the strong.” It is difficult because there are so many obstacles in the way. One obstacle is what I call scorekeeping. Most of us are good scorekeepers. If someone gets us, we’re going to get even aren’t we?

When I served a student church in a small community when I was in seminary, there was one woman who was a matriarch of the church. She was beloved not only in our church but in the community. Everyone had good things to say about Maggie. I never heard Maggie say a bad word about anyone, and I never heard anyone say a bad word about Maggie. One day I went to visit with her to try to discover the secret to her kindness. She said, “Kipp, I learned this lesson years ago. The more I try to get even the more I get behind.” Stop keeping score.

Another obstacle to forgiveness is that we so easily give up on each other. Sometimes when I meet with couples for premarital counseling, it is a tough thing as a part of my job to be with those couples for only four or five minutes and I realize they don’t have a chance. Whether it is that they are immature, they are selfish, or that they just don’t care about each other, they’re not going to stay married. Sometimes I’ve been wrong about that, but most of the time it is pretty easy to tell, and I know I’m going to be doing a wedding ceremony for them. Do you know what I want to do at the wedding ceremony for a couple like that? Instead of giving them rings I want to give them a parachute, because I know they are going to be baling out on each other, giving up on each other. There are other couples, however, that when I visit with them for only a few minutes it is obvious that they care for each other. They love each other, and they like each other. At that wedding ceremony what I want to give those couples is some Velcro, because I know they will be sticking together.

Another obstacle to forgiveness is that many of us have a memory problem, not that we forget, just the opposite. We remember. I come from a part of the country, a part of the south, where the good ol’ boys on the front of their pickups had license plates that read: “Hell no I ain’t forgettin’,” and they were

talking about the Civil War! It was Emerson who said of one of his kind friends, "His heart was as great as the world, but there was no room in it for the memory of a wrong."

This past week I saw a man interviewed on one of our local news programs. It was the grandfather of the young man who was killed in the drive-by shooting. There were four or five boys in the car and another car went by and shot into the vehicle several times. As I tell you this story, I am appealing to the very best in you because we can learn a lesson from this grandfather. This grandfather said, "There is a part of me that is angry. I want to get even. There is another part of me, a far greater part of me, the spiritual part of me that says, 'You have to forgive what they have done.'"

Craig Kocher is the Dean of the Chapel at Duke University. He has shared these words that say something which is as important as our own salvation. He says, "One day each of us will stand before the throne of grace and on that day the questions will not be "Was your theology perfect? Did you point out the sins of others? Did you win the debate? Did you get the practices exactly right?" Instead, God will ask us, "Did you encourage? Did you build up the body of Christ? Did you help others become holy? Did you help others serve God? Did you love? Did you forgive?" Well . . .? Amen.