

The 15th Sunday after Pentecost
September 13, 2020
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Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Genesis 50:15-21
Psalm 103:8-13
Romans 14:1-12
Matthew 18:21-35

Church closed due to COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic: livestream available on Facebook and YouTube.

There are some who look around at the hellfires of this past week and look for who's to blame.

In southern Oregon, there were rumors that the fires that started down in Ashland and swept up to destroy the towns of Talent and Phoenix were being set by *antifa* activists. To be clear, they were just that: rumors, mostly spreading like their own kind of wildfire on social media. The fear-mongering has been widely debunked ... but a lot of collateral damage done. ⁱ

And then there are those who look at every disaster – from terrorist attacks (since at least 9/11) to every natural disaster, including this week's devastating fires all across the West – and they see it as a punishment from God. The supposed sins change over time, but the idea of a vengeful God seems bizarrely attractive to “some of those who claim to follow Jesus.”

I put “some of those who claim to follow Jesus” in quotes deliberately and provocatively, because those voices do not speak of any Jesus I recognize from my reading of scripture in general or from my reading of this morning's gospel in particular. Indeed, this morning's gospel – as I read it at least – reminds me that Jesus preached of a God who gives and forgives far more than we ask, far more than we can scarcely imagine.

I remind you that in last Sunday's gospel, Jesus called for his followers to do whatever they could to bind up the wounds of a broken community. Jesus preached of love. For love is what binds the community together: love for the most vulnerable who need it most; love for those who strain the bonds of love; love for those most hard to forgive.

I said that – and more – last week. And I mentioned then (in passing) that we'd pick up this morning with Peter trying to limit the implications. That's where we return this morning.

After all that Jesus had been saying, Peter understands he has work to do. For the good of the community – and for the love of God (and neighbor)! – he knows he'll have to forgive others. But it's clear to me that he worries what it will cost him; he wonders just how much will be expected of him, and whether it will be more than he has in him to do.

So he asks Jesus: “how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?”

To be fair, seven is a number that went above and beyond the letter of the law. It must have seemed like a pretty generous offer. (Most people would stop at two.)

But Jesus says, “Not seven times, but ... seventy-seven times!” Or it might be “seventy times seven!!!” (The text is actually a little unclear to translators.) Either way, the point should be clear to Peter – and to us. It isn’t about numbers.

Seven must have seemed to Peter a pretty generous number of times to forgive any person. But seven is still measurable: seven seas, seven colors of the rainbow, seven days of the week ...

Jesus wants to take forgiveness out of the “countable” category and put it in the realm of the incalculable. Jesus pushes Peter – and us – beyond our capacity to keep score. It looks like he expects us to forgive over and over again, more times than we can count.

And here’s the thing: if it feels like too much to expect of Peter – or of ourselves – I think that that most likely is precisely the point. It is impossible (what Jesus is asking); it is unreasonable for Jesus to expect us to forgive like that.

But what if?

What if that which seems impossible is merely a possibility we haven’t yet imagined.

I think that’s why the parable that Jesus goes on to tell is built on a scale with numbers that are ridiculously large, implausibly large, unimaginably large.

Jesus says that the slave in this story owes the king 10,000 talents. (Actually, the text literally says a “myriad” of talents, but the term took on the count of 10,000 in classical literature; it represented a number that seemed (in days of old) innumerable.)

Well, let’s do the math. A single talent was about 130 pounds of silver, valued at 6,000 denarii. So depending on just how many days a year a laborer could work, it would take a laborer anywhere from 15 to 20 years of daily sweat and toil to earn just a single talent. 10,000 talents, then, would translate into at least 150,000 (or perhaps up to 200,000) years of labor!

It’s a ridiculous sum. More than anyone would lend. More than anyone would be able to borrow. And more than anyone could possibly hope to repay.

From the start, this whole story is ridiculous. Impossible. That must surely be intended.

And yet there it is. According to the story Jesus is making up, this slave owes 10,000 talents. And as he could not possibly pay the debt, the king orders him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, as payment of the debt. (And it would have been a very meagre partial payment at that.) But that’s just bookkeeping in the world as we know it.

Ah, but this is a parable, a story of the kingdom of God ... and decidedly NOT the world as we know it. So the ridiculous story (from the start) takes an incredible turn here in the middle.

The slave falls down and begs the king to be patient. He begs for more time to repay the debt.

And then the king – out of compassion, we're told, but with no more explanation than that ... the king releases this slave and forgives the whole debt. He cancels it entirely. He writes it off. It's an absurd plot twist. The hardhearted king has just been waiting, it seems, for a chance to go soft.

And why?

Because that's who he is. (And nobody knew this about this king.) He's not really hardhearted; he's really a bleeding heart, not bound to our sense of right and wrong. So this king wipes the debt out entirely.

The thing is, though, it looks to me like the slave failed to notice – or at least that he failed to understand – what just went down. I don't think he even realized that the king did more than he had been asked to do; it was more than he could imagine.

It's a subtle distinction, but important. For you see, although the slave asked to be given time to repay the debt, the king wipes the slate clean. The slave begs the king to be patient with him, but the king doesn't have time for that nonsense, so he erases the debt entirely. He cancels it all.

And the slave didn't notice.

And because the slave didn't understand, he continues on with his bookkeeping ways. As soon as this slave walks out the palace door and comes upon a fellow slave who owes him 100 denarii, he desperately grasps at the chance to begin collecting some of what he thinks he still needs. He's still desperate to repay a debt he no longer owes. He didn't notice that he'd been freed from all that.

Again, the math matters to our understanding of it all. A single denarius was worth about a day's wage, so that means that the second slave owed the first about 100 days of labor.

No small debt, to be sure, but still ... the first slave had just been forgiven 60,000,000 denarii!! And yet he's so desperate to collect every denarius he can that he demands payment from one of his fellow slaves ... and with a violence that far exceeds the way he himself had ever been treated: he grabs the other slave by the throat; he chokes him; and finally he has him thrown into prison (as if a debtor's prison could possibly produce a way for his repayment).

It is an appalling turn of events. It shocks all their peers. Because they see – and we do, too – what the king had done. And they see – and we do, too – how appallingly trapped the slave remains in a vicious cycle of pain and violence that no longer makes any sense. It does him no good. And it does great harm to his neighbors. But he fails to see any option: he's like a mouse in a cage, and he doesn't even know it; like a hamster on a wheel, and he doesn't even see it.

And at this point there may be some who point out that the king, in the end, does turn punitive. He punishes the ungrateful, unforgiving slave, handing him over to be tortured until he would repay his entire debt – which is to say, until the end of time.

But take some care with the apparently obvious conclusion. This is a parable that Jesus tells, not an allegory. And not all statements about the king in a parable pertain directly to God. No, a parable tries to prick our imaginations, get us thinking about new possibilities for our tired old world.

The center of this parable – as I read it, in any event – is not the wrath of God at the end. No, the punishment is nothing more than a chilling reminder that we are mostly blind to the glory of being alive. We have failed to understand the freedom that has been given us to choose a world where love reigns. And so we remain locked in a vicious cycle, and keep on building on a world where debts are held onto and offenses repaid.

No, the center of this parable – at least as I read it – is not the vengeance of God, but rather the impossible, unimaginable magnanimity of God.

And the parable is an invitation to notice that we have received so much from a God who gives us more than we ever knew to ask. We didn't ask to be born, but here we are, given life and beauty and love. The story Jesus tells reminds us of a God who forgives us more than we could scarcely imagine. This God is free, not bound by our failures. This God is free to love us as we are – free to invite us into that same freedom, both for our sake and the sake of the world.

This parable is an invitation, really, to live counter-culturally – to live always aware that life is a gift and every moment a new beginning.

Or we can torture ourselves ... in this world and the next, and for all time.

So I return to our human tendency to try to figure out who's to blame for the hellfires of this world – both the literal fires and the metaphorical fires we experience.

Here's the thing, there are those who will work to get to the bottom of blame. We have a judicial system – not always fair, I realize ... but a judicial system to sort all that out.

But for the rest of us the question of who's to blame is the wrong question. The real question is what are we who have been given and forgiven so much to do? What have we been freed up to do in the broken, hurting world. How can we bring freedom, love and forgiveness to bear wherever there are those in need?

In our daily living – in hard times and in good – look less to figure out who's to blame, and look harder to see those who rush in to love and serve. For they are our heroes. They show us a better, nobler way to live. And they show us what God looks like in this world and the next.

If we can grasp the wonder of it all, we might just find a way to live unbound by the wrongs inflicted on us by another, and not needing to work so hard to figure out who to blame. Or as the first verse of our opening hymn this morning put it:

Let us build a house where love can dwell and all can safely live.
A place where saints and children tell how hearts learn to forgive.
Built of hopes and dreams and visions, rock of faith and vault of grace;
Here the love of Christ shall end divisions:
 All are welcome, all are welcome,
 all are welcome in this place.

May we aspire to live there, imagining new possibilities for how to live together rather than settling for the tired old world that looks merely for who's to blame for all that's gone wrong.

May we build such a house where love can dwell.

ⁱ One of many stories debunking the lie @ <https://www.opb.org/article/2020/09/11/antifa-wildfires-oregon-rumors-fact-check-debunked/>. Sadly, the later news stories suggest that at least one fire was an arson fire (and a body at the scene suggests violence the motive), so blame will be assigned if not to an identified perpetrator then perhaps the houseless (or other marginalized members of the community) in Ashland.