

15th Sunday after Pentecost

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Introduction

Today's Gospel passage has two connected elements – an exchange between Jesus and Peter, and a parable which is ostensibly about God's forgiveness. It is also organically linked to the passage we explored last week and, like it, can sometimes fall victim to being confined to a particular way of reading. However the power and beauty of the Gospel texts is that they are seldom exhausted by a single interpretive slant; in particular the parables of Jesus are rarely simple allegories to be decoded – a didactic way of making moral points; rather they are devices for initiating conversation and inviting us into critical reflection on our ways of being and doing.

So, while this passage does indeed have important things to say about the magnitude of God's forgiveness, and our need to likewise forgive those who fail or injure us, it also contains pointers which can direct our attention to things which might hinder our journeys towards forgiveness, reconciliation, and the repair of our fractured relationships.

Preparation

Read the parable through several times or in a number of different versions. Make a list of what you consider to be the key words relating to it (they don't need to be ones which actually appear in the text itself) under the following headings: actions; emotions; motivations; outcomes. Now try and write a very brief synopsis (perhaps five or six sentences) of your own using these key words as the backbone.

Text

Matthew 18:21–35

Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?"

Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

“For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.

When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him;

and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made.

So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’

And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.

But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’

Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’

But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt.

When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place.

Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.

Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’

And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt.

So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

Comment

When we read the parables of Jesus it’s all too easy to forget that they were not simply stories told to passive listeners, delivered and over in not much more time than it takes us to read them. As John Dominic Crossan points out, they would

almost certainly have been given and heard in a much more extended and interactive form – with questions from the hearers directed towards Jesus, and no doubt with debate and discussion also going on between themselves then and later as they tried to tease out the purpose of the story. In the same way these parables of Jesus invite us to engage with them in a deep way – to think, reflect and wrestle with their many layers of nuance and meaning. So, if we take a step away from the issue of forgiveness and its degrees which we usually take as the primary reading here, what else might this parable direct our attention towards, especially when read within the wider context of the whole chapter?

Jesus' parables of the Kingdom of Heaven often ask us to reflect on systemics rather than the specifics of a particular story *per se*. Sometimes it can be the system outlined in the parable itself which we are being asked to critique; sometimes it is the underlying dynamics or attitudes which we need to attend to. Of course it is often both aspects but I think in this instance, it is in the latter where we can find a useful lens for reflecting on conflicts and how we manage or mismanage our responses.

The parable outlines a pyramid involving status, power, control, and the resulting upwards flow of wealth (with those at each level taking their 'cut') which would have been completely familiar to Jesus' 1st Century listeners. Indeed it is not that alien to us in the 21st Century either! Without getting bogged down in the specifics of the system here or the fantastical figure involved, it seems reasonable to assume that the King begins his reckoning with those at a high level of power and uncovers financial malpractice of some kind. His initial response is calculated to not only put a stop to this but also to send a message down through the entire structure. However, in response to the servant's pleading he reconsiders and instead from pity – and perhaps a dash of pragmatism – overlooks the malpractice. But, just as with the initial punishment, this amnesty too has implications not just for the top-level defaulter but also for the whole pyramid below him. Perhaps it is only a temporary state of affairs but, for the moment at least, the King has introduced a different narrative, one of financial amnesty, and with it a chance for some recalibration.

However as the story moves on from this promising position we come to a second key moment which sees the first servant immediately returning to the old paradigm of 'pay me what's mine!' But in so doing, he also rebinds himself to everything associated with that narrative including its retributory aspects, and it is this choice rather than the actions of the king which ultimately determines his fate. We're not told why he chooses this path – and as we know human motives are rarely unmixed – but the story leaves us in doubt as to its disastrous consequences for him. The chilling words in v34, like Jesus' earlier hyperbole of cutting off, tearing out, and casting away, serve to underline the absolute seriousness of the issue.

This takes us back to some of the things which we considered last week when we looked at the first part of Chapter 18: the way our own orientations and actions can sometimes drive us deeper into cycles of conflict and relational breakdown; the need to pay attention to these and take responsibility for addressing them. It also draws our attention again to the 'binding and loosing' of v18 and of another possible way of reading this. We tend to understand this as other people or situations being bound or loosed by our actions. However we should also recognise it as something which we can (and all too easily in the case of 'binding') do to, and for, *ourselves*. Our choices play an important part in determining the degrees of freedom within which we can act, and the creativity with which we can do this.

This parable then, especially in the wider context which Jesus is addressing in Chapter 18 might raise a number of questions for us: are there narratives or patterns of behaviour which we are binding ourselves to which are hindering progress towards the resolution of a conflict or the restoration and repair of a particular relationship? If so – what are they and is there some way in which we can address them and, if necessary, free ourselves from their inhibitory power?

And perhaps this is also something of what Jesus is trying to show Peter in v22 when he names a number which is way beyond the requirements set out in the Old Testament (which Peter believes he has already generously exceeded): it is not simply that Peter's understanding of forgiveness is *too small*, but that it is also still tied to an economy of perception and action which is predicated on *calculation* – something which is alien to the Kingdom of God with its 'chaos of uncalculating love'.* This too might be a helpful lens through which to look at patterns of thinking or behaviour which could derail our journey towards forgiving/accepting forgiveness, or to repairing a damaged relationship or situation.

*a wonderful phrase from a prayer of the same name by George MacLeod

Response

If you are able, reflect on a situation where you find difficulty with forgiveness (giving or receiving), repairing a relational breach, or resolving a conflict situation. Try and identify whether there are any patterns of thought or behaviour involved which could be binding you: it might be something about the way you tell over the situation to yourself, or to others; it might be that you *keep* telling the story, and thus making it definitive in some way; or it might be that there are elements of calculation in your responses which impede movement forwards. If you can identify any such patterns, are you able to discern anything about the underlying emotions or motivations which sustain them? Is it possible to see ways in which you could help yourself (or be helped) to change these patterns or loosen their hold on you?

These are not easy things to think about and you may find it helpful to do it in conversation with a trusted friend, supporter, or counsellor.

Prayer

Jesus,
Your life set before us
the patterns of the Kingdom –
ways of being and doing
which bring freedom
and flourishing.

May we find the clarity and courage
to see and own
those habits of thought, word, and action
which bind us to unhelpful pathways
and keep us trapped
in barren places;

then, help us see and learn
how we might instead
make and inhabit
the patterns
which bring life.
Amen

