

The Main Thing

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee
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24th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A

Matthew 18:21-35



I had a professor once remind the class that in times of crisis in the church it is important to “keep the main thing, the main thing.” The professor went on to say that the task for the church was to reach agreement on what the main thing is, before the crisis, so that during the crisis, everyone could lean into that main thing.

I suppose it goes without saying that our nation is in the midst of a crisis at least as profound as the one we remembered on Friday, September 11th, and perhaps even greater. With almost 200,000 Americans dead from the virus, the west coast ablaze, a bitterly divided nation politically, a racial reckoning, and widespread economic distress, the temptation for us as followers of Jesus Christ is to run down any one of a number of tracks, to throw our lot in with voices coming at us from all sides telling us what the main thing should be.

Which is why I am grateful each day to lead a congregation that affirms again and again, at font, table, and pulpit, through the Book of Confessions and the Book of Order, and in the way we structure our common life, that the main thing is the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ. Grace is that which can and should unite us and inspire our living in these and all days, especially now.

“How many times should I forgive?” Peter asks Jesus. He is rightly onto the main thing, but he’s a numbers guy, so he seeks to quantify it. “Seven times?”

There’s a story in the Old Testament, one I’m sure Peter knew. It comes from the Book of Genesis, right after the story of Cain killing his brother Abel in a fit of jealous rage. The story says that after God confronts Cain and banishes him from his presence, God places a mark on Cain’s forehead, and anyone who harms Cain would suffer a sevenfold vengeance. Lamech is one of the descendants of Cain, and he announces to his wives, “If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-seven fold.” It is a way of boasting that “No one can touch Lamech.”

Jesus reaches back to this story, taking the number that signified unlimited vengeance in Genesis and using it to signify unlimited forgiveness.

Jesus is inviting his disciples to enter the kingdom of God. Seventy seven times is another word for infinity. Instead of Lamech's boast of unlimited bloodshed and retribution, Jesus opens a world of forgiveness to any who dare to take on his name.

I know. This is really impossible. It's the first thing I think when I read this text. It is, at best, hopeless idealism, at worst, dangerous utopianism. If we begin forgiving all the people who wrong us at the level Jesus suggests, we would open ourselves to all kinds of evil. I suspect the disciples are looking at Jesus with the same look of impossibility, because the next thing he does is tell a parable.

There's this manager who owes his boss ten thousand talents. Ten thousand talents are exactly 100 million denarii. The annual total taxes of Judea, Idumea, Samaria, Galilee, and Perea combined only amounted to eight hundred talents. It was written of Amaziah that he hired 100,000 mighty men of valor as mercenaries for one hundred talents of silver. Ten thousand talents represent more than the wages of a day laborer at that time for 150,000 years.¹ 10,000 talents is seventy-seven; it is infinity.

In this strange world, a mid-level manager has borrowed the amount of money even the richest person you can think of would never be allowed to borrow.

What does the manager say to the boss in response? "Infinity, huh? I'm good for it."

The first shock of the parable comes when the boss does not just put the impossible debt on hold, but forgives the manager outright. He simply allowed the debtor to walk away, forgiven and free. The amounts of money are surpassed only by the amount of grace extended by the boss. All is forgiven.

Infinity is the right word for what God has done for us. Amazing grace, we sing, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. O for a thousand tongues to sing, our great Redeemer's praise; the glories of my God and king, the wonders of God's grace.

But the parable does not stop there. Another surprise awaits us in the form of an encounter between the newly-forgiven manager and a slave who owes him 100 denarii, an amount that *could* be repaid. The slave asks for the same patience as the manager, the

¹ Buttrick, George. The Parables of Jesus. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1928), page 93.

only difference being that he can pay it back. We expect that he will be given the same grace. Instead, the manager takes him by the throat and throws him into prison.

The manager has been forgiven, but he does not yet live in the world of grace. His heart has not been changed by the grace shown him. He still dwells in a prison of his own making.

The parable invites us to view ourselves as forgiven debtors – no more, no less – living among fellow debtors. To be forgiven means to discover the deep truth that, as Anne Lamott writes, “Not forgiving is like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die. Bitterness and resentment worm their way into us and rob us of our joy, of our lives. God’s forgiveness frees us to serve and forgive others.”

When Madge and Fred got divorced, it was said of them that they were more bitter in their divorced life than in their marriage. During their divorce they fought over everything, even the Tupperware. Earlier in their marriage they had bought a china set together. In the divorce they split it evenly, ensuring that neither could ever use the china when the whole family came over.

They continued to live in the same town, which was struck by an ice storm one winter. Fred was without power for ten days, and as a severe diabetic, this meant problems. Madge, in an inexplicable act of grace, invited Fred to stay with her until his power came back on. Madge’s comment at the end: “I am positive divorce was the right thing.” Fred’s comment: “Well, maybe this would work out a second time.”

A few weeks later, Fred showed up at Madge’s door with a box in his arms. It was his half of the china set, which he returned to her in gratitude. And now, whenever the whole family is over, Madge serves the food on a full set of china, a sign in their midst of the healing power of forgiveness.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “In the end, staying angry with those who have wronged us is how we protect ourselves from them. Refusing to forgive people is not only how we punish them; it is also how we keep them from getting close enough to hurt us again. Nine times out of ten it works. But there is a serious side effect. It is called bitterness, and it can do terrible things to the human body and soul. We can let our anger teach us something and then let it go, because when we hold onto it, it only hurts us. It becomes resentment – arthritis of the spirit.”²

² Taylor, Barbara Brown. Gospel Medicine. (Cambridge/Boston: Cowley Publications, 1995), page 9.

The parable in the end, points us to the only thing in the world that can truly set us free and orient our living in these days of crisis, it points us to the main thing – God’s amazing grace. It is hard to know at the moment what the future holds. But as we live out of these baptismal waters of grace – receiving it, giving it, walking in it as we interact with one another, remembering it as the main thing that holds us together as a church and gives us a vision, we know the future belongs to Christ, which is more than enough for the living of these days. Amen.