

“The Parables According to Matthew, Part 7: Brothers”:  
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)  
for July 30<sup>th</sup> 2017 (8<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost)  
by Foster Freed

Matthew 18: 21-35

With our arrival at this morning’s parable—the parable of the *unforgiving*...or as it is sometimes called the *ungrateful*...or perhaps we might best call it the parable of the *hypocritical servant*...

...with our arrival at this morning’s parable, we engage the first of the lengthier parables we encounter in Matthew’s Gospel. Up till now, the parables we have examined have been brief...often offering little more than one image or, perhaps one simple action that defines the parable. But this morning our parable—a parable found only in Matthew—our parable tells a very full story, a story filled with a handful of memorable characters, a story that includes one highly memorable villain.

And possibly...possibly because the hypocritical villainy and villainous hypocrisy of that unpleasant character produces such a sharp response in most of our psyches, this is not a parable in which we are likely to find a great deal of subtlety. As a friend of mine shared when I told him which parable I planned to preach on this morning, he has strong memories of having heard this parable as a young child: and it made good sense to him even then. In part, I think...

...in part that has to do with the fact that children tend to develop, at a surprisingly young age, an instinct as to things that are unfair. (Many of us will remember telling our own parents—or hearing from our own children—that most heartfelt of complaints: “That’s not fair!”) Nor is it difficult to see how even a young child will recognize the unfairness of the actions of this parable’s ungrateful servant, who pleads for mercy, is shown mercy...but then turns around and fails to show even a modicum of compassion for a fellow servant. Even the most kind-hearted among us will have a hard time disagreeing with the harsh verdict spoken by that servant’s master: *And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt.* While the guilty party in at least some of Christ’s parables tends to draw our sympathy, there is very little with which to sympathize in the case of this unforgiving servant. To quote the Red Queen: “Off with his head!”

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Given...given the comparatively straightforward nature of this parable...and its themes...I want to use the time allotted to me this morning, to look more closely at a handful of those themes...themes which play an extraordinarily central role in the shape and substance of the Christian life. Of the themes I hope to explore over the next 15 minutes or so, none is more central to the Christian life—and none is more central to the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant—than the theme of forgiveness. After all...

...after all: the context in which Matthew locates this parable makes it abundantly clear that this is a parable that is going to address the question of forgiveness. Coming at the tail-end of a discourse in which Jesus speaks of how Christians ought to deal with a sister or brother who has hurt the community, and immediately following Simon Peter's follow-up question--*Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?*—there is nothing veiled about the connection between this parable and the importance of learning to forgive! But there's more!

As early in Matthew's Gospel as the Sermon on the Mount—in which Jesus, amongst other things, teaches his disciples what we now know as the Lord's Prayer—Jesus, in the process of teaching the prayer, highlights the petition concerning forgiveness. That's very different from Luke's Gospel in which Jesus also teaches the prayer, but highlights the “give us this day our daily bread” petition. But no: in Matthew, what Jesus says immediately after sharing the words of the Lord's Prayer...what he chooses to highlight is this: *For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.* And yes: it would be no exaggeration to suggest that the Parable of the Unforgiving servant could rightly be heard as a story specifically shaped in order to highlight that important section of the Lord's Prayer. We could, in fact, do a lot worse, than to recall this parable each and every time we pray the Lord's Prayer; forgiveness is just that central to the Christian life. But here's the big question!

What do we mean by forgiveness? Given its importance—linked to the fact that most of us struggle with forgiveness—we had better get it right. And here, I think this parable can be of great assistance, because it illustrates what forgiveness is...and perhaps more importantly...what it is not. You see: our tendency is to turn forgiveness into something that primarily turns on our feelings. So often someone will come to me and say: “I'm still angry at them....so I guess I haven't forgiven them!” And yes: this parable's closing words—when Jesus reminds his hearers that they must forgive from the heart—is partly to blame for that misunderstanding. In the Biblical context, however, the “heart” is not primarily the seat of our feelings so much as it is the center of the whole human person. To say, in a Biblical context, that you must forgive from the heart is tantamount to saying: You must forgive with complete integrity...which is not the same thing as saying that you must forgive in a way that instantly abolishes all your negative emotions toward someone who has profoundly hurt you. Consider...

Consider the nature of the forgiveness offered and received in this parable. The Master of the servant—when asked for forgiveness—doesn't instantly become bosom buddies with that servant...doesn't enter into intimate friendship with that servant...but simply releases the servant from his debt. When asked to do the same thing for a fellow servant—which request he declines—the failure to forgive doesn't involve his having chosen not to invite his fellow servant over for a beer and a game of chess, but in his refusal to release his fellow servant from his debt.. That's all that is involved in forgiveness. That forgiveness can sometimes take us further...can sometimes be a crucial step in restoring a broken relationship...that's a wonderful thing to behold: if and

when it happens. The fact that it does not always happen...that fact that it rarely happens instantly (since it takes time to restore trust when a relationship has been harmed): all of that needs to be acknowledged frankly. But the fact that you have not restored relationship with someone who has betrayed you at a deep level does not mean you have not forgiven them. Indeed: there are, I think, but two basic non-negotiables where Christian forgiveness is concerned: first that you renounce revenge (not justice but revenge; they are not the same thing!)

...first, that you renounce revenge—you set the person free—and second, that you are willing to pray for that person’s highest good.. When you take those two steps, even if you are unable to take any subsequent steps, you have entered into the way of forgiveness. And you are entitled to take the Lord’s Prayer on your lips without thinking yourself a hypocrite: asking God to forgive—to release--your debts as you have released those indebted to you. This parable provides an excellent model of what forgiveness does—and does not—entail!

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This parable...this parable also raises some troubling questions about the image of humanity—the Biblical image of human persons—that informs the Christian way. I’m referring here, to the contrast between the size of the debt the servant owes the Master versus the size of the debt his fellow servant owes to him. According to the parable, the debt owed to the unforgiving servant—by his fellow servant—is a debt of one hundred denarii. Now: one denarii would have been a day’s wages...and so a hundred denarii is not an insignificant amount, but neither is it a fortune. But that unforgiving servant, for his part, owes his Master an absurd sum: ten thousand talents. And since one talent would have been the equivalent of twenty years of wages, you don’t need me to tell you that a debt of ten thousand talents is a debt that could not possibly have been repaid. And you know...I really think...

...I really think Jesus, in shaping this parable in that way, is trying to remind us that we human beings are debtors even if we don’t owe a red-cent to any of our fellow human beings. Why? Because the debt we owe to our Creator is an immeasurably large debt...a debt that becomes significantly compounded when we recognize that our Creator is also our Sustainer and our Redeemer. And yes: it’s that side of Christian anthropology—a fancy word that simply indicates the Christian way of thinking about human beings—that side of Christian anthropology has, at times, been so emphasized (to the neglect of other aspects of the Christian way of thinking about human beings) that it can be quite oppressive, especially when we speak in terms not of “debt” but of “sin” and then unleash that sort of understanding upon children. I am certain...certain that we all know people—and I am quite certain that some of you are those people—who were raised in an environment in which parents saw it as a significant measure of their duty to keep their own children from thinking too highly of themselves: environments in which you did not even think to praise your children lest it make them too big for their own britches! And yes: I know many people—who would only darken the doors of this church for a wedding or a funeral, and would do even that

under protest—because as children they came to the conclusion that the Gospel, far from being “good news” was nothing but bad news. But all of that...and this needs to be said with great emphasis...

...all of that represents a horribly one-sided distortion. Yes: here in this parable, as in so many other parts of Scripture, we men and women are depicted as debtors: as those in debt to the God who creates, sustains and redeems us. But that assertion is always made in the context of God’s undying love for us: this God who at the end of the sixth day of creation (having created human beings) pronounces that it is good, that it is very good! This God who in Christ lived as one of us, died for all of us, and lives again in active intercession for us! Every child of God is a cherished child...and every child of God deserves to be shown that they are, indeed, cherished and honoured and loved, debtors though they be!

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The final theme...the final theme I want to name this morning, has to do with the one word title I affixed to this sermon. That word is the word “brother”. Brother. Because it seems to me that the very best way in which to understand the failure that marks the heart of this parable...

...the failure that defines that which we instinctively find so disgraceful in the behavior of the unforgiving servant..

...it’s his failure to recognize the deep bond that connects him to his fellow servant: namely that they are, in a very real sense, brothers. While it may be true, within the world of the parable, that they are only brothers in a metaphorical sense, to speak theologically...

...in other words, to speak not of the master in the parable but to speak of the One who is Master of the Kingdom of Heaven...

...to speak of **that** Master is to find it almost impossible to avoid the traditional affirmation that was so much a part of the ethos of the mainline Protestant Church throughout most of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries: namely that the recognition of the Fatherhood of God leaves us no choice but to acknowledge the Brotherhood of Man. The Fatherhood of God...the brotherhood of man. And I know...I know that we are no longer quite comfortable with the exclusively masculine formulation on display there. But surely the essential underlying truth of that affirmation is as needed today as it was back then: leading us to recognize that those who look to God as their Creator dare not fail to recognize in one another a precious sister, a beloved brother. And not only in our triumphs, but also in our foibles and our failures and our indebtedness to God and to one another. As a blessed teacher once said to me, many many years ago: “Long before Christ came to unite humanity in salvation, we fallen creatures were united in our brokenness. When we can acknowledge even our unity in brokenness, God’s light has already begun to shine.”

*We are pilgrims on a journey,  
fellow travelers on the road,  
we are here to help each other  
walk the mile and bear the load.*

*When we sing to God in heaven...*

And though the road is undeniably long and the terrain at times formidable, know that the day will arrive when we will most certainly find ourselves singing to God in heaven!

*...when we sing to God in heaven,  
we shall find such harmony,  
born of all we've known together  
of Christ's love and agony.*

May it be so! In Jesus' name! Amen!!