

Cosmic implications of forgiveness

Matthew 18: 21-35

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Biodiversity is such a gift of nature. That is the variability among all living organisms.

I think in the late summer and early fall as the purple asters bloom in a field, side by side with the golden rod.

There co-existence so different and yet so complimentary.

Gold and purple both royal colours – side by side. Without any competition.

And as curious botanist, Robin Wall Kimmerer discovered, the harmonious beauty of the bright, chrome yellow and deep purple, complimentary colors, opposites on the color wheel, actually attract far more pollinators than if those two grew apart from one another.

Robin Wall Kimmerer, Braiding Sweetgrass

Their beauty and harmony is purposeful.

Biodiversity such a gift of nature.

Yet some would say human beings are not natural.

We do not simply have instincts, but we have desires that remove us from the natural order.

Capitalism and Desire by Todd McGowan.

Desires that are distorted.

Desires that create wealth for one, at the expense of the other.

Desires that create power for one, and the oppression of the other.

Desires that create love for one, and indifference to another.

The hope for humanity is that our values, our ethics and our spirits become tuned with The Spirit, aligned with LOVE. Surrendering these distorted desires in order to celebrate diversity. This gift of nature.

Each of our readings today lead us to reflect on the mechanism of forgiveness. When we are in disharmony.

For as Bishop Desmond Tutu and his daughter the Reverend Mpho Tutu, write:

“without forgiveness we remain tethered to the person who harmed us. We are bound with chains of bitterness, tied together, trapped”.

The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing

Forgiveness is multilayered.

From the intentions of our heart for the other, for ourselves, to the communities, the Earth, and our concept of the Divine. Of God. Forgiveness is deep and wide.

Our gospel today presents us with a parable Jesus told, relayed to us by the Matthean community – a late 1st century community who were piecing together their Jewish beliefs with the teachings of Jesus in the context of a society under Rome's imperial control.

Where some tried to maintain the Roman social visions, societal structures and practices, arrangements of power, by using theological sanctions.

This community retold Jesus' parables to reveal the disharmony in that system.

Jesus' parables are not meant to make us feel comfortable.

While they highlight familiar characters or scenes in the hearers landscape, they subverted them.

Parables are intended to invite us to question even the seeming absolutes of our religious faith. Today's parable is no different. It has many, many layers.

A first layer – probes human to human layers of forgiveness...

Scholars wonder if this indeed is a model of forgiveness, or is it actually disturbing our understanding of forgiveness?

We see a person 'forgiving' but gaining social power.

Forgive comes from the Latin word "perdonare," from which we also get the word pardon, meaning "to give completely, without reservation."

It links an action to a motivation – to give completely, without reservation.

In the parable we see a contrast between the actions of the King and the actions of Jesus, who was bringing the Kingdom of God.

When Jesus interacts with a person in the preceding chapters of Matthew, we see a person in need gain something new and life-changing: encounter with God's reign, healing, food, sight, and insight. It is not Jesus who gains.

Quite the opposite in the parable - the king's action are not of this kind.

"The one who benefits most from not selling the slave is the king! If this official, powerful and skilled enough to be entrusted with raising such a huge sum...

If the king sells him, he will lose the man's expertise. By not selling him, the king gains a slave even more "indebted" to him, even more submissive and controllable—not to mention a region even more grateful that it has not been taxed so heavily!"

So as New Testament scholar Warren Carter puts it: "The king's "pity" is a self-serving act that reinforces his own power"

In Resisting and Imitating the Empire: Imperial Paradigms in Two Matthean Parables

And in the words of T. S Eliot, "the greatest treason, is to do the right deed for the wrong reason."

Forgiveness is not to gain more human social and economic power.
Forgiveness is actually not primarily about the other person.

**Forgiveness is a state of the human heart. It is the gift of release, of naming hurt.
Forgiveness is an act of self-compassion and love.**

Forgiveness is not:

- It is not approving someone else's action.
- It is not excusing the action, denying it, or overlooking it.
- It is not just moving on (particularly not with cold indifference).
- It is not forgetting or pretending it did not occur.
- It is not justifying or letting go of possibly needed justice.
- It is not calming down.
- It is one step towards reconciliation, but it is different from reconciliation, which requires a sincere apology from all parties.
- It is not dependent on the one you forgive
- It is not a one time event, but may need to be repeated
- It is not a restoration of full trust (trust takes time to develop or to be reinstated).

Forgiveness is a state of heart.

A second layer of the parable:

Highlights for us the ripple effects of the state of heart, of our distorted desires.

And while some interpretations of the parable, highlight that slave acted in the opposite way to that of the King, when we see the King's action to reinforce power and status, the lower ranking slave uses similar bullying tactics to secure power over another.

He has learned his lessons well from his imperial master!

In Resisting and Imitating the Empire: Imperial Paradigms in Two Matthean Parables

Widening our understanding of forgiveness – hardness of heart though an intimate and deeply personal state, ripples outward into the community, into the neighbourhood and into the Earth.

I think, as an example, of the story we tell here in this church of teens some years ago throwing stones through stained glass windows.

As we continue to tell the story, as we hold on to this wrong act, I wonder of what becomes of our heart posture toward young people and to our neighbours?

National Bishop Susan Johnson, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, reflects on this passage And reminds us that in this season of creation – if God loves creation, then we must think of creation in the same way as we do our neighbour.

She asks: What if Peter had rephrased his question to Jesus as “Lord, if a neighbour sins against me, how often should I forgive?”

Or, what if the neighbour asking the question was creation asking about us? How many times should creation forgive us for overfishing, deforesting, polluting, endangering species, desertification, commodifying or even just not paying attention?

Whether it is seventy-seven times, or seventy times seven, are we past the breaking point?

A final layer – looks at cosmic forgiveness.

The parable asks of us to think – How does the ‘kingdom of heaven’ operate?

Surely not as an empire?

For in Matthew chapter 13 we learn of a paradigm for God’s kingdom – using simple lowly metaphors a sower (13:24), a grain of mustard (13:31), leaven (13:33), treasure (13:44), a merchant (13:45), a net (13:47).

And Jesus reinforces this in Chapter 18 – in God’s empire is made up of people who are usually socially marginal, unimportant, and vulnerable - like a child.

And so the final verse of the parable - probes us to ask the question:

What does God’s forgiveness look like?

For all – King’s/Rulers who abuse their power.

Disciples who stumble along with bitter hearts, trying to forgive.

Friends, while I don’t know the mystery of how it all works,
I lean into God’s mercy each morning.
Mercy that is new every morning.

For as we struggle with self-forgiveness and of being loved.
We realise that God is not made in the image of our empires.
God does not induce guilt or feelings of shame...

The hope for humanity is that we tune our distorted desires to The Spirit of LOVE.
Surrendering into mercy, on our way to celebrating diversity.
