Rev. Jim's Sermon for September 17, 2023

MATTHEW 18:21-35

"Then Peter came and said to Jesus, "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."

This Gospel from Sunday is another challenging one. We are told clearly that God is love, but this looks a bit like "tough love."

Looking at the story that Jesus tells here, it is important to remember that the parables are metaphorical. They usually start with the phrase "the kingdom of heaven is like" or as we have this morning "the kingdom of heaven can be compared to."

Jesus' parables are designed not to describe heaven in a literal way, but to move our hearts and minds forward toward the divine life to which we are called, to shake us up in order that we might become more open to the Spirit, less confined by the opinions that we grasp onto in order to either feel safe, or to justify our lives.

The parables use ordinary everyday things, people, situations, and circumstances of life to show us that God is accessible to us and can be experienced by us through the simplest parts of our day to day lives. The difference between heaven and earth, is that on earth we are separated from experiencing God *directly*, we can only experience God through the material world, our senses, our thoughts and feelings. As Paul says, "Now we see as through a glass darkly, then we will see God face to face." That dark glass, the world of things, may obscure the face of God, but it is the only vehicle which we have to come closer to God. The parables encourage us to see the face of God all around us.

Sometimes the parables recount stories that show both the best and worst of human nature. At times they make us wonder, at other times they give comfort and sometimes they are warnings about what we are capable as human beings.

Today's story is of the later variety. It depicts a man who is given mercy and who turns around and treats his neighbour with cruelty. The point, of course, isn't to think about all the cruel and unmerciful people "out there", or to reinforce one of the traditional views of God as a cruel and punishing despot, it is to put *ourselves* in this story.

It is often helpful (and a time-honoured practice) to apply the action in the parables to our inner lives. In this story we have a series of actions: the merciful behaviour of the king, the cruel actions of the servant, and then the return of the king who puts the cruel servant in jail to be tortured. So, if we think of these actions in terms of our own interior lives, we might, for instance, see this as a story about the ways that we miss God's mercy, treat others worse than God treats them, and then torture ourselves for being the way we are.

What is this parable really about? It is preceded by a conversation between Peter and Jesus in which Peter asks, "what do I have to do to fulfill my obligation to discharge my responsibility of forgiving someone who has wronged me?" I think the parable is Jesus's way turning the question upside down and inside out. It isn't really about forgiveness at all, it is about mercy.

William Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice contains one of his greatest and best-known speeches:

The quality of mercy is not strain'd.
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes. 'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
The thronèd monarch better than his crown.

The Merchant of Venice, Act IV, Scene I

What is mercy? It is a choice we make, and one we must make over and over, to treat others, not with justice, not with fairness, but with love, letting go of our need to be right, to punish, to hold the wrongs of others over their heads. My old high school coach used to say, "Never mistake kindness for weakness." Shakespeare takes this further; he says kindness and mercy are not only *not* weakness, rather they are the greatest strength that any person can exhibit.

In showing mercy, Shakespeare says, we act like royalty. Mercy is enthroned in the hearts of kings, he says, and by this he does mean actual kings, but rather *all* who act with mercy. When we show mercy, we are at our best, our most powerful, our most Godly. To act with mercy is to act great.

As with forgiveness, the person it is the hardest to show mercy toward is ourselves. But as with everything, to be a merciful person we *must* begin with ourselves.

There is much in scripture that urges us both to seek God's mercy, and then to receive that mercy, "which falleth like the rain". And then to extend that same mercy to others. Our parable is such a scripture. It contains a warning that the way of cruelty and unforgiveness will result in a tortured mind and heart.

There is so much cruelty in the world today and too little mercy. I don't think I need to elaborate. The scripture calls us to a different way of life to a life in which justice is not enough.

Again, Shakespeare says it well. He writes:

mercy is an attribute to God Himself;
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice.

Or as St. Paul writes in Corinthians: "Love is not easily angered. It keeps no record of wrongdoing."

May this day be one in which you come closer to the light of Christ, be healed guilt and shame and feel, see and touch the presence of God around you.

Amen