

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Nuance and irony are overlooked when it comes to reading Holy Scripture. I feel this because we are at times too busy parsing out and determining our own self-righteousness from scripture to consider how nuance and irony factor into a certain passage. We are too busy attempting to figure out what *we must do* to enter the kingdom of heaven, rather than digging in at attempting to figure out what we are being taught about what God has already done to free us from our debt. And this plays out today in our Gospel lesson.

We lose nuance and irony because we enjoy the stories within scripture about the villain or the haughty Pharisees that get their come-up-ins, or an evil sort of person who gets his just desert. Now people do not usually cheer and clap in churches as the Gospel is being read, but we can, at times, be seen bobbing our heads in approval as the unforgiving slave is handed over to be tortured...especially after he has been forgiven of his debt and refuses to forgive the debt he is owed.

³² Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' ³⁴ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. ³⁵ So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart." (Matt 18:32-35)

The parable that is before us today then becomes nuanced by our context, our prejudices, and our personal feelings and opinions. This is the problem we encounter in our understanding of this parable today...we quickly assume that if Jesus is telling us this parable, then we can quickly conclude an understanding of forgiveness in a monetary context...in other words; forgiveness is like clearing a debt. This understanding is then "gospel" for us because Jesus says so. The parable about forgiveness, we assume then, is to be understood in a monetary context or a monetary understanding, meaning forgiveness is like clearing a debt...a one-time act that we better do because we don't want to hear...'You wicked slave! And we certainly don't want:

³⁵ So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart." (Matt 18:32-35)

There are two things that I get to do as a pastor that just fills my heart with such joy...one of them is Baptizing a new child of God which we will do in a few moments and the other is teaching the kids the Lord's Prayer during Vacation Bible School. It is a real joy to listen to the voices of the kids praying the Lord's Prayer. Now I know in their young minds they don't fully understand what they are praying, but I wonder too if we fully understand...especially when we pray:

Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

Or we pray:

and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us;

And of course, there is the version Jesus teaches us earlier in this Gospel:

¹² And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. (Matt 6:12)

And just like the closing of the parable before us today, when Jesus teaches the Lord's Prayer he says:

¹⁴For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; ¹⁵but if you *do not* forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (Matt 16:14-15)

The parable today as we heard with the unforgiving slave ends with a similar intent. Well now isn't that special...the parable is easy, forgive as you have been forgiven...OR ELSE! Is this really what Jesus is teaching us with this parable today?

In the context of a financial debt, this makes sense, just forgive others and we are good to go...right? Well, if this is the way we see it and think it is to be, then please come and tell these dear children that stand before you with their arms stretched toward the heavens praying the very words Jesus teaches us all that they better follow through...OR ELSE!! Unfortunately, this is what we assume Jesus is teaching us today with this parable about the unforgiving slave. I return to what I said at the outset, nuance and irony seem to get misused and overlooked when it comes to reading Holy Scripture.

From the start, the debt that this "slave" not the servant but the slave's debt is just unimaginable. For a slave of this time period to amass a debt of this size would amount to about 200,000 *years* of labor. But what I find laughable is that the slave pleads with this stupid king, who by the way seems to be the one who puts the slave in this position in the first place, nonetheless, this slave pleads, 'Have patience with me, and I will repay you everything.' *Now how...*is this slave going to pay this debt? It would be like me saying I can pay the current national debt if you just give a chance. And then of course, we hear that the slave is forgiven his debt and then turns around and goes after a man who owes him a hundred *days* not years, but one hundred days wages.

The irony and even the humor is of course that this slave has amassed an incredible debt. By this debt we know then that this is not a working slave...but he is nuanced by our antebellum context and we miss the fact that the slave is rather a subordinate official in charge of collecting taxes for the king from a large region who answers to the king and has incurred this debt through mismanagement. This amount is huge; it's massive, even for an official servant and the actions of the king are justified in our minds by our personal feelings toward the slave's unforgiving actions to another slave who owes him. And so we take delight when we hear:

³⁴ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt.

So we walk away feeling pretty good simply because we pay our debts. But the parable is about forgiveness...well then, we figure, I just have to forgive as I have been forgiven...and we won't worry about the or else part. Is this really the Good News for us today...knowing full-well that I can't forgive as I have been forgiven...is the Good News to simply plead to God to overlook the "*or else*" part? Here is where we are stuck if all we see is forgiveness as a onetime debt forgiven.

Whether we like or not, we don't forgive as we have been forgiven...and we just look past the OR ELSE. This is NOT what Jesus is telling us today in this parable. The parable is NOT designed to leave us in this hopeless place but we stay here thinking all *I HAVE TO DO* is forgive as I have been forgiven. If the parable only causes us to ask, what must I do, then we are missing the point. Great is the forgiveness of this debt but we see quickly that forgiveness, true

forgiveness is more than wiping the debt off the books...forgiveness, true forgiveness, is continuous but even this does not happen in this parable.

From the very start of the Gospel lesson today we hear Peter ask Jesus, how often should I forgive, as many as seven times?" Jesus reminds Peter, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." Then we hear that the kingdom of heaven *may be* compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. And here is where the wheels fall off for us because we tend to make God the king in this parable. If Jesus is teaching us about God and the Kingdom of God we hear that forgiveness is to happen seventy-seven times. In this parable, as much as we like the slave who could not forgive to get what is coming to him, we see the king or God as we assume the king to be, only forgives the indebted slave *once*. While the king shows incredible mercy when forgiving the slave his debt the first time, forgiveness doesn't happen for the slave when he could not forgive the slave that owed him and the king has him handed over to be tortured.

The Good News for us in this parable, is that forgiveness, for God, is never a completed act. Forgiveness can never look back. Forgiveness can only move forward because it is a continuous or an ongoing action. I have to tell you, if God is really like this king then I am in big trouble because I have more than seventy-seven sins. But I know we have a merciful God because we see it in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the forgiveness extended to us all through Jesus Christ who is the embodiment of continuous forgiveness.

Today, simply by drawing us in with our delight in the retribution of the unforgiving slave, this parable shows us that our concept of forgiveness is certainly not God's concept. This is to say that God is not the king, because we like to think that we are the king simply by our assumptions about this parable. The delight we take in retribution within this parable, shows us that, we have the inability to forgive as we have been forgiven, the inability to fully understand all that is given to us and then to see what has been given to us extended to others.

Luther wrote in the Large Catechism concerning the fifth petition of the Lord's Prayer that says forgive us our debt as we forgive our debtors. Luther writes in the catechism,

"This should serve God's purpose to break our pride and keep us humble. He has reserved to himself this prerogative: those who boast of their goodness and despise others should examine themselves and put this petition uppermost in their mind. They will find that they are no more righteous than anyone else, that in the presence of God all people must fall on their knees and be glad that we can come to forgiveness. Let none think that they will ever in this life reach the point where they do not need this forgiveness. In short, unless God *constantly* forgives, we are lost.¹

We tend to think forgiveness is when we have bent over backwards for someone seven times or seventy-seven times. But the parable shows us what happens to forgiveness when we think it is completed.....it ends. The king bent over backwards to forgive a massive debt, and then it ended, forgiveness did not continue from the king. But God's forgiveness does, God gives more...God gives Jesus Christ to continuously forgive us all and free us from the debt of sin and

¹ Kolb, Robert ; Wengert, Timothy J. ; Arand, Charles P.: *The Book of Concord : The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Minneapolis : Fortress Press, 2000. "The Large Catechism, The Lord's Prayer, The Fifth Petition" page 452, par 90-91.

death. And we see this continuous forgiveness again today handed to us in this Holy Meal and we especially see God's very active grace and forgiveness in the Baptism of these dear little girls, Tyrany and Bella.

The parable of the unforgiving slave, in all its extravagance...with all the exaggerations, can only be fully understood in light of Christ's death and resurrection and this shows us what God does to forgive us and not what we do to gain our forgiveness. God's forgiveness for us is embodied and made known when Jesus gave up his life for all the sins of all the believers of all generations in all the world...an act that continues to forgive each of us...who have gathered here...right now...around this Word, this Font, and this Holy Meal of promise and forgiveness.

This is God's profoundly incalculable grace freely given to all. Through Jesus Christ, God has forgiven all our sins and has healed all our infirmities; God has redeemed our lives from the grave and in God's mercy and lovingkindness...crowned each of us with life everlasting.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.