

Genesis 50:15-21
Psalm 103:1- 12
Romans 14:1-12
Matthew 18:21-35

Sermon for September 13, 2020

GLENN'S COVERED BRIDGE IN A MEADOW
By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

With the parable recorded in our Gospel reading for today, we find ourselves back in the territory of forgiveness, about which we've spoken a great deal from this pulpit in the past. Let's take a moment and remind ourselves of a couple of things we've learned about forgiveness.

We learned that in general, the act of forgiveness requires the personal acceptance of a penalty. When someone owes you a hundred dollars and you forgive that person the debt, the missing hundred dollars doesn't just reappear out of thin air. When you forgive the debt, what it means is that you yourself suffer the hundred dollar loss. You accept the pain of that loss, rather than requiring the other person to do so.

And what's true of this simple financial example is true of all types of forgiveness. If someone hurts you and you forgive him, what that amounts to is you accepting the hurt, and not requiring the other to somehow make amends.

And that's also why forgiveness can be more or less complete. If you owe me a hundred dollars and I forgive you the debt, it's just human nature for me to expect some sort of recognition and gratitude from you. Better yet if word gets around about my generosity to you.

It's the same element of human nature that seeks public acknowledgment of our moral behaviour. It's the reason that foundations created to do good works almost always have someone's name attached to them: the Clinton Foundation, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Ford foundation, and so on. It's why when you wander around college campuses, so many of the donated buildings have the name

of the donor above the front entrance; or why public buildings and bridges and sections of highway are so often named after politicians.

The simple truth about human nature is that by and large people don't just want to **do** good, they want **to be known** for doing good, they want their goodness to be seen and admired, sometimes even envied.

And so also with forgiveness. It runs strongly counter to human nature to forgive completely, expecting nothing in return, no acknowledgment, no applause, no admiration, not now, not ever. It's the forgiveness counterpart to Secret Santas, who are perhaps my favorite people in the world. You know who I mean, or rather, you don't know who I mean because even I don't know who I mean. Secret Santas do good secretly: that's the whole point. They give for the pleasure of giving, and nothing else.

Complete, perfect forgiveness is like that: forgiveness for the pleasure of forgiving, and nothing else.

*But wait, you say. It's **not** pleasurable to forgive! I'm still out the hundred dollars. It **hurts** to forgive. Didn't we already establish that?*

Ah yes. And now we come to the point of our parable.

Matthew 18: 21-35.

This is commonly referred to as *the parable of the unforgiving servant*, because it's usually interpreted as being principally about the callous behaviour of the servant. We have a king who forgives one of his servants a fabulous sum of money – in modern terms, a debt of tens of millions of dollars – and the slave shortly after refuses to forgive a debt of a paltry hundred dollars or so. When the king hears about it, he orders him to be tortured until he repays the debt, which obviously he'll never be able to do.

The traditional interpretation of this parable is that it provides a stern warning to the audience. The king represents God, the king's forgiveness of the huge debt represents God's forgiveness of our sin; the slave represents all of us; and the moral is that if we don't forgive others, God will punish us severely, perhaps even with eternal torment.

As I say, that's the commonest traditional interpretation, but I think it's the wrong interpretation for several reasons. The first and foremost, of course, is that in this church we proclaim the universal love of God for all of God's children, and the eventual reconciliation of all of those children to God. If we begin from that, then clearly the king in the parable cannot represent God, at least in the most important respect. God is not going to throw any of His children into a hell of eternal torment for any reason, and therefore certainly not for a single episode of unforgiveness.

But if it's not to be understood in that crude, literal way, how are we to understand it?

Do you remember how we've argued from this pulpit during the last few weeks that most of the narrative parables Jesus uses are drawn from real life, from incidents with which the members of his audience might even already be familiar? Various details of this story such as that torture for criminals was prohibited by Jewish law make it clear that this was something done by a Gentile king, a non-Jewish king, and we can be sure that the audience of Jews listening to Jesus tell this story would have been shocked and appalled by the behavior of the king. And if we focus on that – on what would have been the effect on the audience Jesus was addressing when he offered this parable – I think we can get clearer about what Jesus is concerned with.

Think for a moment about the question Peter asked, and in response to which Jesus tells us this story about a Gentile king. Let me read it again:

18:21 Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?"

18:22 Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy times seven."

And then Jesus immediately tells his story. So you would expect the story to be about the extent of forgiveness. Peter asks him about how often to forgive someone, and Jesus essentially says, There is no limit. And then he tells a story about a king who forgives once, and then, when he sees that his generous act didn't have the intended consequence, he tortures and imprisons his servant. Is this forgiving seventy times seven? Clearly not. This is forgiving once and done.

Suppose you have a relative who is always doing damage to you in one way or another. The normal human reaction will be resentment and anger. But you learn from your Bible that the Christian should turn the other cheek, should walk the

extra mile, should love her enemy. And so you forgive your relative. And by that, I don't mean you just say certain words like *I forgive you*. I mean you make a real effort to act towards that relative as if the hurt had never occurred. You don't expect or require apology or anything else. You yourself accept the full cost of the insult or injury,

And then she does it again, she does something awful to you. What is your reaction?

Wouldn't it probably be something very like the king in the parable? You're doubly outraged now, because not only did your relative hurt you the once, but she continued to do so even after you've shown her your own generosity of spirit. Your forgiveness didn't have the intended result of improving her, of changing her! The ungrateful wretch!

That's the human reaction, isn't it? And yet. And yet, Jesus says seventy times seven.

Do you see the point now? At the end of the parable, Matthew cites Jesus as referring to forgiveness from the heart, and that must be the image Jesus used to describe that forgiveness which is without limit, which does not depend on anything outside of the forgiver, which doesn't seek or look for validation in anything outside of itself. It is forgiveness offered for its own sake, and not for whatever it might accomplish.

We're standing here this morning next to a perfect illustration of what I'm talking about: a covered bridge...in the middle of a meadow.

Many years ago, our dearly beloved Glenn had a vision of a bridge. But it was a very unusual bridge. This bridge wasn't created in order to accomplish something else. It doesn't transport goods, it doesn't connect one bank of a river to the other; it doesn't contribute to commerce or travel in any way. Glenn created his bridge without any further objective than the creation of something whimsical and lovely, and its value doesn't depend on anything other than being what it is. The members of the Woolston family – sharing Glenn's vision – who labored to create and maintain and repair this bridge did so and do so for the sheer joy of creating something good and beautiful. It certainly did cost them something: their time and their labor and the cost of materials. But they didn't pay that price in the

expectation or hope of receiving something in return. It was, as it were, simply a beautiful gift to the world: a covered bridge in a meadow.

And that brings us back to our original objection. Forgiveness hurts, it costs us something. How then can it possibly be pleasurable, how could we possibly do it for its own sake?

The answer is that for most of us, it's hard, it's not something that comes naturally to us; and therefore it's something we must seek to acquire.

And that brings us at last to the point. For most of us, becoming Christian, following the model of Christ, is a goal, and for most of us – this speaker above all – it's a very distant goal. Christ does not teach us how to change the world; he teaches us how to change ourselves.

And neither does Jesus teach us the laws of heaven, which you must obey or else. That's what the traditional interpretation of the parable teaches: forgive or else.

What Jesus does is teach us the ways of heaven, and then leave it to us to adapt ourselves to those ways, so that come that blessed day when we enter through those pearly gates, we will feel at home, we'll feel like we fit in, we'll already be able to appreciate and enjoy at least a little of what heaven has to offer.

The model Jesus offers us – the model of forgiveness from the heart; the model of Secret Santa forgiveness – is most certainly a hard one, for most of us, a very hard one to follow. But then, that first step we took as a baby was a hard one, too. And we fell down many times, before we were able to walk with comfort. Many many times. Perhaps as many as seventy times seven.

And so our prayer for this morning, heavenly Father, is that you help us with our stumbling first steps in forgiveness. Support us, encourage us, help us up when we fall, just as our mothers and fathers did when we were learning to walk. Set us on the path that leads eventually to a heart of perfect forgiveness, the heart that forgave even the Cross, the heart of Your child, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.