

*Sunday Worship  
A Service for Your Use at Home  
St Paul United Church of Christ  
5312 Old Blue Rock Road  
Cincinnati, Ohio 45247  
Allen M Fluent, Pastor*

*September 13, 2020*

*Because of the pandemic caused by the corona virus, our congregation, along with many others, has decided that we must forego gathered worship services at this time. Each Sunday until we gather again, we will provide worship materials that members and friends can use in our homes in the knowledge that we are not alone, but are celebrating these holy days with our friends and neighbors in the faith. As you use this worship service, I hope you will pause and remember the tune to a familiar hymn as you read the words, and pray as partners in the fellowship of Christ.*

*If you have access to a computer or cell phone, you may want to open the video recording of the Scripture and Sermon provided by the pastor on both our church website and the message sent to all who are on our email list.*

*Today is the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost. Welcome to our worship. For those who are regular participants in the life of our congregation, it is Stewardship Sunday, the day we are reminded to consider our promise to support the work of St. Paul Church in the coming year. A letter has gone out reminding all members to complete a pledge card for 2021 in time for the commitments to be dedicated at the worship service before our annual congregational meeting on Sunday, September 27.*

The theme of our worship service today is forgiveness. As we begin our worship on this Sunday, let us join together in reading the words to a hymn that reminds us of God's forgiving love.

***Forgive our sins as we forgive, you taught us, Lord, to pray,  
But you alone can grant us grace to live the words we say.***

***How can your pardon reach and bless the unforgiving heart  
That broods on wrongs and will not let old bitterness depart?***

***In blazing light your cross reveals the truth we dimly knew:  
What trivial debts are owed to us, how great our debt to you  
Lord, cleanse the depths within our souls and bid resentment cease.***

***Then, bound to all in bonds of love, our lives will spread your peace.***

***(Rosamond E. Herklots, c. 1969 Oxford University Press)***

Our reading from the Psalms for this morning is Psalm 103, verses 1-13:

***Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless God's holy name.  
Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits –  
who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases,  
who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,  
who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the  
eagle's.***

***The Lord works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed.***

***He made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel.***

***The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.***

***He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger forever.***

***He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.***

***For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward  
those who fear him.***

***For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust.***

Our Gospel lesson this morning is a strange parable recorded in Matthew's Gospel, chapter 18, verses 21-35. The story is occasioned by a question the disciple Peter asks Jesus about forgiveness. It was not unusual for Jesus to answer a question by telling a parable; but in this case it appears that the Gospel writer took Jesus' teaching about forgiveness and wrote a story about it as a teaching for the early church. I say this, because the "church" did not yet exist during Jesus' lifetime, and the story appears to have been written to teach people how to care for one another within the church's fellowship, as it dealt with the oppressive policies of the Roman Empire. It is also important to note that the story is written to be understood in a severely hierarchical society, where rulers had virtually absolute power over those who worked as tenant farmers, serfs, or vassals under them, and those at that bottom of the power hierarchy were actually in danger of being enslaved by those in power.

The word used to describe the central character in this story is translated in many versions of the Scripture as "slave." But the financial relationship between him and the king seems to imply that he was a vassal, though the king threatens to sell him and his family into slavery for his indebtedness. Something else: it is in the nature of a parable that its application has limits; though the story's point has something to do with God, we should not think that God is here described as an arbitrary, all powerful monarch. Let's listen to the story:

*Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if a brother or sister 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 likened to a king who wished to settle accounts with his vassals. 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 vassal 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 vassal released him and forgave him the debt. But that same vassal, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow vassals who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' Then his fellow vassal 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 vassals 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 vassal! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow vassal, 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."*

*The Sermon:*

*(Note: For those who want to see and hear a video of the complete sermon you can find it on our church website or open the message that you will receive if you have given us your email address.)*

**"I forgive, but I don't forget," my grandmother used to say. She was a country woman from Missouri, with a sharp tongue and a kind heart, and she spoke her mind and had a clear conviction about right and wrong; but I always suspected that her "not forgetting" bordered upon holding a long-lasting grudge. She was also poor, and had been crippled from childhood by being yanked by the leg from a runaway wagon when the horse pulling it was spooked. My grandfather was a laborer in a small Illinois town. They had six children, and they were wiped out financially in the great Depression. And after that, they were too old to work their way back up again. Forgiveness, for her, was therefore not a trivial thing; it had to do with real hurts and losses, and real human failures. Forgiving and forgetting only seems easy for those who are comfortable in life.**

Our story from the Gospel today is not about people who lived in comfort. Nor was it told to people who would be unable to comprehend what it meant to struggle day by day. “How many times do I have to forgive them, Jesus?” Peter asked. How many times, when you’ve been lied to, stolen from, personally demeaned, forced to bear someone else’s burdens, treated as a lesser human being because your people were conquered by Rome and put in slavery, or because you grew up in the poor rural land of northern Israel, far away from the cultured regions of the Empire? How many times do you have to forgive, when you already know the future holds no promise for you, when you believe that the world is not going to change, because people don’t want it to? Five times? Six times? Seven?

“Seven times seven,” Jesus responded. It was his way of saying, Just keep on forgiving; but he also did not encourage people to give up on justice. He knew that the worst kind of poverty is the poverty of hope; and he understood the urge to seek revenge, and the hardship of forgiving what was impossible to forget. The first people who received the Gospel were people like that. Sometimes their anger drove them to violence and revolution. Thousands were crucified by Rome for defiant actions against the society. Untold numbers were imprisoned or enslaved. Among the victims, some began to turn against their own, having become competitors against each other for the small leftovers available to the conquered people of the Empire.

“I’ll tell you a story,” Jesus said. And what a story it was - a preposterous, funny and awful story all at once!

“Once there was a king who was running short of cash,” he said. “Like that ever happens,” someone in the crowd whispered. But Jesus continued unfazed by the interruption. “The reason for his financial situation is that he had lent money to his vassals and they hadn’t paid him back,” said Jesus, to incredulous stares. Whoever heard of a king like that?

“So he tried to get his money back. He was particularly angry with one of them, who owed the king 10,000 talents.” That’s a lot of money. It would have been about the equivalent of 20 years salary for a day laborer, I’m told. So, since the story says he no longer had it, the vassal and his family may have been living very well at the king’s expense!

Now Jesus doesn’t tell us how this odd situation had evolved; but we might imagine what was in the minds of those who were listening to the tale – all of them of the working class who lived in near poverty under the thumb of the rich and powerful beneficiaries of the Empire. “He must have played a clever trick,” they might have

thought, with some admiration for his craftiness. “It sounds like he had more cash to spend than the king. Too bad he didn’t keep it, though.”

So the foolish king brought in the crafty scoundrel, and told him to pay him back. If he didn’t, the king had the power to take away his freedom and sell him and his family into slavery, so he threatened to do just that. But the vassal, who cared little about the king, and had no sense of guilt about robbing from the rich, but had no way to return the money, because he didn’t have it anymore, did the only thing he could do to preserve his freedom: he appealed for mercy, groveled and cried, and made a ridiculous promise that he would make good the impossibly enormous debt. He did, in other words, what often works when a poor man is dealing with someone powerful: he asked him to exercise his power on behalf of a grateful and unworthy servant who would henceforth be a better man. It was an appeal to the rich man’s pride.

At this point, Jesus’ listeners are laughing loudly. They know the game. The one thing you can do to persuade the powerful is to get them to believe they are using their power in a magnanimous act of forgiveness. Henceforth, the king will not have to accept the embarrassment of being taken in by this lowly vassal. Instead he can say, “I had the power to forgive him for the sake of his family and his repentance, and I have sufficient wealth to sustain this loss. After all, what is 10,000 talents to someone as wealthy and powerful as I.”

So far this is a funny story, the kind people without power tell when they want to mock the pretensions and posturing of the wealthy class. So far, the vassal seems like the kind of clever scoundrel who is the hero of such stories, outwitting the king himself with a mixture of fawning and false helplessness. But wait - the story now takes a more somber tone:

The clever vassal has escaped punishment for his misdeeds and gotten his exorbitant debt forgiven, but, since he has spent all his ill-gotten gains, he still needs money to live. So, as he leaves the court of the king, he happens upon a fellow vassal who owes him money – not 10,000 talents but just 100 talents. Still, enough to make a considerable difference in someone’s financial well being. Unfortunately, the debtor does not have the money to pay him back. So the man who has just been forgiven an enormous debt that was owed to the king and has had his life given back to him does the unthinkable. He has this modest debtor thrown in prison until the debt is paid. But now he has gone too far. It’s one thing to find a way to take something from a rich and powerful king; there’s a feeling in the neighborhood that the king probably

deserved it, and his assets were the result of oppressing the poor people anyway. But this is something else. The man has refused forgiveness to a neighbor and increased his suffering. The other neighbors recognize this violation of the neighborly code, and in a group they retaliate. Since they too are powerless, they turn to the king, demanding justice from the one they know has the power to intervene. "You wicked vassal!" said the king when he heard it. "I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me for mercy. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow vassal, as I had mercy on you?"

Now isn't this remarkable – the king in the story still doesn't understand. The complaining neighbors raised no objection to the vassal getting away with his failure to pay his debt to the king. It was only when the vassal put a poorer man in jail that the community became enraged. The reason for that is that there is no merit in an oppressor's gift of mercy. That's because he's still the oppressor, and it doesn't really cost him much of value, so long as his social status is maintained. In an unjust world, forgiveness is a treasure that can only come from the hands of those who have really experienced loss. Only those who have suffered have the power to forgive.

But if not mercy, kings are sometimes in a position to render justice. That's what the people are counting on in this story. But it's always a gamble, because kings seldom understand what justice would mean among their subjects. What happens is that the king sends the vassal to be tortured. In that, there is some kind of justice. At least there's retribution. But we notice that he does not set the debtor who was put in prison by the vassal free. As we leave the story, he is still in jail.

Is there a hero in this story? If there is, it's hard to see; but there's a lesson here. It's a teaching about community, and a message about compassion. The story tells us that forgiveness is about solidarity in a community where people care for one another, work together to question unfair practices that are hurtful to our neighbor, and accept the cost of their own vulnerability as they learn to live together, and survive one another's slings and arrows.

Perhaps I should think again about my grandmother's words. Perhaps we should forgive, but not forget. In fact, it may be needed that we open up those places in our world where we've done harm to one another, either by intention or by accident or misunderstanding, keeping in mind that the 100 talent sins of individual misbehavior need forgiveness from the heart, so that we can work together on those great big 10,000 talent injustices that keep societies polarized and fearful all the time.

**May the day of reconciliation come.**

Our Time of Prayer

In our prayers this week are the people in California and Oregon who are losing homes and farmlands in the raging wildfires. We pray for the thousands of refugees on the Greek Island of Lesbos, who have been evacuated from their homes in a primitive camp that has been burned to the ground. We pray for people marching for freedom in the streets of Belarus and Hong Kong. We pray for those families that are suffering from violence in our own land, and for all those who work every day to bring that violence to an end. We pray for everyone who is affected by the CoVid 19 epidemic – those who are sick, those who treat the sick, those confined to hospitals unable to be with relatives and friends, and those who are battling depression at home. And we pray for our nation in this election season, so filled with angry voices and mixed, confusing messages. God in your mercy, hear our prayer.

**Let us pray** in the words of our Lord Jesus:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom  
come, Thy will be  
done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and  
forgive us our  
debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but  
deliver us from  
evil. For Thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory forever.  
Amen.**

We close our worship with our Stewardship Sunday hymn, written by 19<sup>th</sup> Century hymnist William W. How.

***We give thee but thine own, what e'er the gift may be:  
All that we have is thine alone, a trust, O Lord, from thee.***

*May we thy bounties thus as stewards true receive,  
And gladly as thou blesses us, to thee our first-fruits give.*

*To comfort and to bless, to find a balm for woe,  
To tend the lone and fatherless is angels' work below.*

*The captive to relieve, to God the lost to bring,  
To teach the way of life and peace – it is a Christ-like thing.*

**The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Love of God our Heavenly Parent, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.**

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**A few announcements:**

- **There will be outdoor worship services on Sunday September 13 and September 27. These will take place outside at St. Paul at 6:30 pm. Bring a chair and masks are required!**
  
- **Sunday, October 18 – George & Tina Tuck have offered their farm for our church picnic. We will gather sometime after 1:00 pm. More details later.**