

Forgive Us Our Debts

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Saint Paul's Batesville
Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 19, Year A
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Matthew 18:21-35

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

One element of this morning's Gospel which I think we rarely focus on is just how much money Jesus is talking about in the parable. We learn that the slave owes ten thousand talents to his master and that the same slave is owed one hundred denarii. It's easy enough to leave the story knowing simply that the slave owes more than he is owed, but we miss an important element if that's all we know.

In reality, we are dealing with measures of currency here which we can estimate. We know that the wage for a day's labor in the first century was one denarius. This means that what the slave wants

from his compatriot is no small sum. It's a hundred days wages, almost a third of his annual income. It's not like he had just spotted his friend a fiver. I think most of us would be more than a little concerned if somebody owed us this much and couldn't pay up. So, at first we might have some sympathy for the slave.

But then, look at how much debt had been forgiven. Ten thousand talents. A talent is a weight of measure rather than a currency, but most scholars of the period in question have determined that a talent was worth roughly six thousand denarii. So ten thousand talents would be sixty million denarii. That's sixty million days worth of wages- 164,383 and a half years, not counting Sabbath days.

If that's hard for you to get your mind around, we can look at it a different way. Like I said earlier, a talent is not a currency but a weight of measure. It was roughly thirty-three kilograms or

about seventy-three pounds. When used as a measure of debt and credit in the ancient world, the assumption would have been that gold was the basis of determination (there was no such thing as fiat money until very recently). So, if the slave owed his master ten thousand talents, he would have owed him 330,000 kilograms of gold. Right now, a kilogram of gold is worth nearly 60,000 dollars. So, if we were to assume that gold were basically as valuable then as it is now, the slave would have owed his master the equivalent of 19 billion 800 million dollars.

Of course, this is ludicrous. Nobody would lend an individual, especially his own slave, 20 billion dollars. Only 8 people in America, the richest nation in the world, have more money than that. I think the point, however, is just how ridiculous it seems. How could one get so bent out of shape about a few thousand dollars when he just had a twenty billion dollar debt forgiven?

Well as ridiculous as it seems, we do just that. We have been regenerated—given new life and the forgiveness of sins—through Baptism. Christ died for our sins that we might live, but what do we do if somebody says something nasty about us? What do we do if somebody cuts us off in traffic or cheats us out of a few bucks or acts rude to us? We don't forgive. We do what the enemy of the psalmist is described as doing:

He put on cursing like a garment*
let it soak into his body like water
and into his bones like oil;
Let it be to him like the cloak which he
wraps around himself,*
and like the belt that he wears
continually.

We love cursing and take no delight in blessing. We let our petty beliefs about what we *deserve* push us to clutch tightly to our resentment until we are defined by it.

I get very worried, as many of you know, when the death of anybody, even a monster like Osama bin Laden, causes celebration in the streets. I get

very worried when the biggest applause line at a presidential debate is for the state executions of 234 people. I'm not making a claim one way or another about whether or not justice was done in these situations. What concerns me is public reaction, and I think it's safe to say that mercy is not a virtue which our society values terribly much these days.

Jesus calls us to forgive our brother. There is a translation issue in Jesus' response to Peter. He might have said "forgive seventy times" or "seventy seven times" or "seventy times seven" (that's 490 times, but the way). What precisely Jesus said doesn't matter so much, though, because it seems that what he meant was "keep on forgiving". There's no limit.

There's a lovely prayer attributed to St. Francis in the back of the prayerbook (page 833 if you're interested), and it seems to sum up what Jesus is saying to us today: it is in pardoning

that we are pardoned. The greatest gift we've ever been given is pardon, but it comes with a caveat. Being forgiven we are obliged to forgive.

It's hard sometimes, particularly when we are sinned against in ways more brutal than a rude word or being cut off in traffic. Unless we get around to forgiving, though, the Cross is emptied of its meaning for us. When we fail to show mercy, we are even more ridiculous than the slave who demanded his hundred denarii. When we confuse justice with revenge we may as well be nailing Christ's hands to the cross ourselves, because we've forgotten what that sacrifice was all about to begin with. But when we forgive, we start to become more worthy of that label which we give ourselves. We become more worthy of being called Christians.

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