

Proper 19 Year A 2020
The Church of the Redeemer, Greenville, SC
September 13, 2020
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Exodus 14:19-31

Psalm 114

Romans 14:1-12

Matthew 18:21-35

Forgiveness, mercy, and a pillar of cloud.

Jesus, through the words of the gospel of Matthew, provides us with a teaching about forgiveness, told through the lens of paying back a debt. Paul writes to the Christians in Rome about strong disagreements in the early church. In Exodus we have the rich imagery of the angel of God appearing as a “pillar of cloud” which stayed between the Israelites and danger. The cloud was so bright it “lit up the night.”

The story is simple enough. Ten thousand talents indicates an incalculable amount of debt; no one in an ancient lifetime could have that great a debt. It is a sum well beyond what a lifetime’s work would generate, and completely impossible to repay. The slave forgiven that debt has been given new life. The slave, in turn, ...

Refuses to forgive a smaller, but still significant, amount of money. The slave who does not forgive is sent to be tortured. It is a neat if disturbing story, with an implied question at the end ... would we forgive the little debt? While expecting forgiveness of our own huge debt to one another? ...

Jesus knows our hearts; we would really like to forgive just seven times, like a daily vitamin ... and **be** forgiven those seventy-seven times. We are supposed to forgive more times than we can count, more times than we can tally or remember. Forgiveness is not a daily vitamin, but a lifetime’s work.

Some acts are beyond (or almost beyond) human forgiveness. As we passed another anniversary of the attacks of September 11, 2001, we remember. We remember where we were, what we were doing, the sometimes frantic measures we took to get in touch with friends and family. The evil perpetrated that day in New York City, Pennsylvania, and Washington, D.C. is unfathomable.

And so Paul’s words to the Romans hit hard – or provide us a bit of relief: “Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.”

Forgiveness means trusting judgment to God, and it is to God that I must place the many horrific acts of today and of history. By giving up our desire for judgment and revenge, letting go of all hatred in our hearts is to let God do the work of God. When God works in our hearts we develop the ability to forgive ... as God forgives us. Our forgiveness comes over and over again, its source the hard work of Jesus' cross.

Forgiveness, in that sense, is a verb, not a feeling. As Christians, we have been commissioned to bring the healing news of Jesus Christ to the world: in the "Great Commission" in the gospel of Matthew, through a multitude of prayers in our tradition, in the confession that we say each day or week, and in our baptismal commitment to help others grow into the full stature of Christ. How we grow into the stature of Christ is one of the subjects of Paul's letter to the Romans. The letter is not really about vegetables, but about which laws apply in fledgling Christianity: those of Moses, Jesus, or Rome? Paul disagreed with Peter and James, who were sometimes at odds with Rome, who sometimes tolerated, sometimes persecuted Christians. Such conflicts through the centuries have brought brutal tortures, murders, and war – and that is within Christianity itself. We have been doing evil to one another since one brother killed the other.

We are not called to live in disaccord with one another, then or now. Maybe one day we will understand that the pillar of cloud is still with us: before us and behind us, lighting our way, shining its light, which is the love and mercy of God. I pray that what we will understand is the tremendous breadth and depth not of our evil but of God with us, of God's countless forgiveness of our humanity and of our most horrific sins. It is that mercy, unearned, that will transform our world.

People flocked to houses of worship on the days following September 11, 2001. We are called to do so today, to flood our communities with prayer, mercy, and faith. Pray for the world. Allow the Lord to transform us into people in whom God's forgiveness and mercy are evident. It is then that we might feel forgiveness, know that we are forgiven, and that we are healed.

Come, Lord Jesus!