

Jeff reflects on Matthew 18:21-35
September 13, 2020

There is nothing easy about parables. There is nothing easy about forgiveness.
There's nothing easy about a parable about forgiveness

Such is the case with this week's parable in Matthew's Gospel. Peter has just asked Jesus how many times should we forgive someone - seven times?

Jesus replies, "No, forgive them 70 times seven," – which means 'forgive them so many times that you stop keeping track of how many times you have forgiven them.' Make forgiveness your default practice.

Then Jesus told a parable about a king who had a slave who owed him what would amount to billions of dollars in today's currency - more than the annual budget of the Roman Empire. Right away we know this is ludicrous. No king would loan that much money to a slave. No slave could ever repay such an amount.

The slave begs for extra time to repay the debt. The king says the debt is forgiven. The king knows that the slave could never repay this debt. The king chooses mercy, although in forgiving the financial debt, the king places the slave in another form of debt – the slave now owes the king complete loyalty for having essentially spared his life.

The slave leaves and meets another slave who owes the first slave an insignificant sum compared to the amount just forgiven. We might expect the first slave to say, "The king just forgave me my debt, so forget about the money. You don't owe me anything."

Instead, violence is unleashed. The first slave chokes the second one, demanding full payment. The second slave also begs for more time to pay. The first slave will have nothing to do with mercy or forgiveness and has the second slave sent to debtor's prison.

The king learns of what has happened, recalls the first slave and says, "You jerk! After I forgave you that huge debt, you couldn't forgive someone else a small amount. You blew it. I withdraw my forgiveness. You still owe me the money and I will have you tortured until you repay me."

By the end of the story, no one is forgiven, no one is reconciled, and everything seems to be malevolently ludicrous. None of which is helped by Jesus' closing comment that God will do this – torture someone – who does not forgive from their heart. Try reading that and then sing "Love Divine, all loves excelling."

Some Biblical scholars think that the writer of Matthew's Gospel often attached his own interpretations to the parables, and that the closing comments did not really come from Jesus; but in either case, we still have a story that has no happy ending in sight.

The passage began with Peter asking for a formula for calculating forgiveness, and instead receiving a story. I think Jesus told parables/stories, because they weren't concise like a formula. Parables invite us to ask questions, to be dissatisfied with the ending and to contemplate what would need to happen to change that ending. Parables ask us to consider, "Where is God in all of this?"

So, where do we think God is in this parable. Let me offer a few thoughts. People's lives in this story are defined by debt. A primary way that the wealthy got wealthier in Jesus' time, was to foreclose on loans and take possession of peoples' farms or vineyards. Poverty and debt threatened many. The king threatens to sell the slave and his family. Even people are commodities, entries in a ledger. The story exposes the harsh, dehumanizing side of an economy creating those with way too much and those with never enough.

Not much has changed. In June 2020, Canada's Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer reported that the wealthiest one per cent of Canada's families have over 25% of the wealth. The report states that the "distribution of wealth among households is heavily skewed toward the wealthiest families." Globally, the 26 richest individuals own as much as the poorest 50% of the world's people!

Where is God in the parable? Perhaps God is in our awareness of that something has to change, that wealth needs to be redistributed.

Jesus knew of the Jewish vision of a Jubilee – a vision of wealth redistribution every 50 years – of debts forgiven and foreclosed lands returned to their original owner. The Jubilee was meant to pause the ever-widening gap between rich and poor, to periodically relevel the economic playing field.

Where do we find God in the parable – perhaps in the possibility of introducing forgiveness into world economic systems.

Perhaps in the possibility of introducing forgiveness into all of our relationships. Forgive 490 times does not mean that at number 491 we can stop forgiving.

Some understandings of Christianity say God does stop forgiving at 490; that at death, God sends us to either heaven or hell – hell being the destination of those who had their chance and blew it, so God no longer has to forgive or care about them.

I am with those of a different understanding – who believe that God's love never ends, that no one is forever banished from God's love, that God's default practice is forgiveness.

Let me be clear: forgiveness does not mean forgetting. Forgiveness does not mean excusing or accepting another's behaviour. Forgiveness may include leaving an abusive relationship or calling the police on an abuser.

Forgiveness is a practice of stopping spirals of violence, injustice, poverty. Forgiveness is refusing to meet cruelty or indifference with cruelty and indifference. Forgiveness refuses to be defined as a commodity in someone else's search for control. Forgiveness is trusting that, even within the one who hurts us, there is a child of God in need of healing. Forgiveness seeks the healing and well-being of oneself, and of the one who has wronged us.

Jesus says God wants us to forgive from the heart. Forgiveness from the heart is trusting that the heart of God somehow beats in every person, that each of us is a child of God in need of healing and love.

We are so used to the acquisition of wealth being skewed towards those already wealthy, so used to using weapons of war to make peace, so used to a world of winners and losers, that forgiveness can seem ludicrous.

Ludicrous - like Jesus' parables

- like a God who always loves
- like answering a 'how many times' question with a story

Maybe that's where we find God - in the ludicrous love divine that excels all love, and that changes us from "glory into glory", until we are "lost in wonder, love and praise."

Forgiveness is never easy, but it holds the hope of a more just and compassionate world.

God, forgive us our debts as we forgive those in debt to us.

God, forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.

AMEN