

Kimberly Reinholz  
Grace and Holy Trinity  
September 17, 2017  
Matthew 18:21-35

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Having a set of Lutheran Grandparents, a set of Roman Catholic Grandparents, an Episcopalian mother and spending sometime in the Evangelical Christian Church I learned and was comfortable with all the “versions” of the Lord’s Prayer.

I am fine with the thy version, the your version, the sins, trespasses and debts. I find myself praying it in my heart and mind interchangeably. Whatever it is that separates you from your fellow human beings and from the love of God needs to be set aside in order for you to live into the covenant that God has made with each of us from Creation and renewed with each of us at Baptism.

That being said, there are times when sins are forefront, when trespassing is primary or when debt looms large on the horizon. Today's Gospel reinforces that it is not the kind of altercation, infraction, disappointment, or failure to live up to expectations that matters but the act of forgiveness that defines us as Christ’s followers. Debt can be great or small, the trespass can be minor or grievous, and the sins can be mortal or venial but the division is still present between individuals.

Peter asks Jesus how often another member of the community should be forgiven and Jesus’ answer is 77 times. But this does not mean literally that at the 78th moment of conflict members of the church should fly off the handle. Nor does it mean that repeated offenses should be overlooked until the 78th altercation. Rather what Jesus explains through “The Parable of the Talents” is that within the church, forgiveness that mimic’s the grace of God is paramount.

But the parable demonstrates the difference between human forgiveness and divine forgiveness. The Lord is God and the slaves are members of the Church. God provides an example of forgiving great debts, which is gracious and loving and patient, at first. This is how we are called to be with one another in community. This is what it means to be beloved, to recognize that our relationship to one another is more important than a few denarii because our relationship with one another is intended to reflect our relationship with the Lord.

When we are baptized into the Church we are all made equals and all of our sins, trespasses, and debts are forgiven, which means that no one can or should preside as Lord over another member. baptism any and all sins which we will commit in our lives are forgiven by entering into a relationship with Christ and into a community of belief where we follow the one who died to sin once for all (Romans 6:10).

We fail to live up to our end of the bargain, in our lives, our congregations, our churches and our communities. Humanity has failed again and again to live into this understanding of beloved equality throughout history. This perceived inequality between God's beloved creation is one of the primary reasons why wars have been fought, walls have been built and protests have taken place from the before time of Pharaoh to beyond the time of Presidents.

Christ's followers however are invited to live into a different kind of community, a community like that described in Galatians where there is no Jew or Greek, no slave or free, no male or female but only Christ Jesus. We are baptized into the body of Christ, the Church, and we are asked to die to our own identity, our own experiences and be born again into a new community, a new relationship with God and with one another over and over and over again not just 7 times, but 77 times and then again and again and again.

But then we have the Old Testament lesson today as well which seems to stand in stark contrast to the message of Jesus. If God is all about forgiveness then how could God drown all of Pharaoh's soldiers? Well I could say even God can have a change of heart, but I think that would be disingenuous to the narrative of Exodus, and I also think that the stories are not as polarly opposed as they may appear on an initial reading. You may remember, that God and the Jewish people by way of Abraham, then Isaac, then Jacob, then Moses and their wives and descendants have come under the thumb of Pharaoh. Over time the relationship between the Jews and the Egyptians have disintegrated to the point of slavery and exploitation. The Jews were treated by the Egyptians as less than cattle. And God renewed the promise of Israel through Moses and his brother Aaron and their sister Miriam he begins again the relationship, the right relationship that is not hierarchical but equal.

God does not expect the Jews to forgive the Egyptians. God does not ask for the Jews to judge Pharaoh either, however. Rather God calls them to leave Egypt and go into the desert to find a new way, to gain entrance into the promised land.

It is God's place to judge, not yours, not mine, not the Jews or the Egyptians, not the Neo-Confederates, nor the Anti-Fascists. Judgement is reserved for the Lord our God.

It is our place to forgive. FORGIVENESS IS NOT EASY. Forgiveness does not mean that we should remain in a place of inequality, injustice, oppression, or violence. Forgiveness means that when we look at ourselves in the mirror we can see the grace that God has promised, and then we we look at our neighbor we can reflect that grace as well, but this can only happen when we are equal to all our neighbors.

It is our calling as God's beloved creation to address inequality in our lives. Not only as individuals but as a single community, members of God's eternal kingdom. It is important for the church to recognize the times when we deviate from the beloved community that God intends when race gender socioeconomic class sexual orientation or any other perceived differences between people cause unnecessary suffering. There is no reason that anyone should feel separated from God's love because of flawed human perceptions. We as human beings are tragically flawed, but we as Christians are miraculously forgiven. As through Grace we are saved so through grace we are invited to share that forgiveness to every person we encounter.

We are reminded of our role as forgivers over and over and over again. Nearly weekly when we come together as the church and we confess our sins. In one version of the general confession: we confess those things done and left undone, in another we admit those things which we control and those things that are beyond our control, and in the one that always catches me off guard when when I am feeling a little holier-than-thou we confess of the evil that enslaves us, the evil we have done and the evil done on our behalf.

But in confession we are not left swinging in the wind: in the next liturgical breath we are reminded of the forgiveness of our sins either by absolution (by a priest or bishop) or by the declaration of forgiveness (by a deacon or lay minister). So our sins, transgressions and debts are as far removed from us as the east is from the west.

It is our struggle as Christians to remember that quintessential understanding that God has forgiven us and so we are commissioned to forgive others.

This does not mean that we are sinless. Nor does it mean that we are blameless. Rather it means that we are forgiven of sin and blame, even though we will sin, trespass, and incur debt not only 7 times, nor 77 time, but 777 times.

God forgives us the 8th time, and the 78th time and the 778th time, and we should likewise forgive our brothers and sisters who are created equal to us and who are made equal to us again in the promises of baptism.

The Church is far from perfect, but we are called to try again, to renew our promise to the Lord our God who will come again to judge the quick and the dead, and whose kingdom will have no end. We are called to seek forgiveness for ourselves and others as we go through this life falling down and coming back to the Lord God again and again asking for forgiveness for those things that we have and haven't done, those things we should and shouldn't do.

That is the essence of what we promise in baptism that we will always begin again, that we will pray and learn and be in community, that we will recognize that everyone else is always beginning again, and that everyone else is equally loved by God. What we promise is that we will give up our desire to judge and that we will endeavor to become the Church which is always embodying forgiveness, based upon our common identity as beloved Children of the Creator, God.

To this end I welcome Claiborne McKinnon Talbott to the Church as our sibling and give thanks that they are forgiven as we all are forgiven, for all we have done, all we are doing, and all we will do that can be considered a sin, trespass or debt, those things that causing a fraction between God and ourselves and amongst ourselves. May you be for us an example of how to forgive one another.

Amen