

Twenty Second Sunday After Trinity, November 16, 2014, Year A

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Matthew 18:21-35

"Keeping Score"

A Sunday school teacher had just finished teaching her lesson and wanted to make sure that she had gotten her point across to the children. She asked, "Can anyone tell me what you have got to do before you can receive forgiveness of sin?" There was a short pause and then, from the back of the room, a small boy spoke up. "Sin," he said.

Today's Holy Gospel reading is often called "the parable of the unforgiving servant." On the surface it seems really easy to understand. There's a servant who owes a lot of money to his king and he pleads with the king for mercy, and the king has pity on him and forgives his entire debt. But then, this very same servant shows absolutely no pity or mercy to another servant who owes him money! When the king hears how he has treated his fellow servant, he takes back his mercy and in essence throws the book at him. In this parable, Jesus is showing us that we need to forgive others in order to be forgiven ourselves and that we will be judged by the standards by which we judge others.

In researching for this message I was amazed to find out the difference in the size of the debts owed by the two servants. The first servant owed the king 10,000 talents. Ten thousand was the highest Greek numeral and the talent was the highest unit of currency at the time. So ten thousand talents was as large a sum of money as could be expressed in words, and the saying "10,000 talents" would have a similar meaning to what would be the equivalent of "a trillion dollars" today! It is amazing that King Herod's entire annual income was estimated to be around 900 talents. Can you imagine how much this servant owed the king? It would be impossible for anyone to ever pay back that kind of money – especially a servant!

On the other hand the second servant owed 100 denarii to the other servant. One denarius was what a worker might receive for a day's pay, so while it seems like a pretty good amount, what he owes is nothing compared to what the first servant owed! Scottish theologian William Barclay put these amounts into perspective. If they were converted into sixpences, 100 denarii could be carried by one person in one of their pocket, but to carry 10,000 talents you would need 8,600 people, each weighed down by 60 pounds of sixpences. If they stood a yard apart, the line would measure five miles long. I think that gives us a pretty clear image of the size of both debts!

Just like 100 denarii was not a huge sum to this servant, we may feel very hurt by someone who has wronged us. No matter how outraged we may feel, we need to remember that we also have sinned and caused people to be upset at some point in our lives too, and that we have no right to consider ourselves better or greater than anyone who has hurt us. And like the servant's debt of 10,000 talents, we also have a debt so great that we can never ever pay it back on our own. The fact is - we do not deserve it - but Jesus paid that debt for us on the cross.

Jesus shows us that forgiving others is not only a condition for our own forgiveness, but forgiving others frees us totally - more than it pardons them. If there is someone who wants to

make genuine amends for something they might have done to us - it is up to us to accept it.

I don't know if you might remember the famous columnist Ann Landers, who was quite well-known until her death in 2002, – but here is a quote that she became famous for: “*Hanging onto resentment is letting someone you despise live rent-free in your head.*”

If we refuse to give forgiveness, we run the risk of hurting ourselves with some pretty self-destructive emotions. Having bitterness toward someone over an apparent wrong can become an obsession that can literally eat us alive! Quite often the person we hold in contempt has no idea just how they have hurt or how despised they are, and so we end up really only hurting ourselves. You might say that **it is with resentment that the road to ruin is really paved.**

In this Gospel reading - Peter asks Jesus a question that comes from their discussion that had just taken place before. In Matthew 18:15 Jesus has just finished talking about the question of discipline in the fellowship of believers. What do you do if someone in the church offends someone? What do you do if someone is doing something that the Church considers sinful? How do you deal with that person? The answer is that you first gently and carefully confront them in the hope that they repent and their relationship is restored with you. If that doesn't work you take a couple of witnesses along and *only if that fails* do you take it to the whole church.

While Peter is an impetuous person who often jumps in feet first, he is also someone who has been around the block once or twice – he is a seasoned businessman, a fisherman – owning a fishing business with his brother. He asks Jesus “what if someone sins against me over and over again?”

I would suggest that we have all experienced something like this:

- Someone does something to you, you confront them.
- They apologize. They say that they are really sorry.
- They say they didn't realize and it won't happen again.
- And of course it does! The very next week!
- So you confront them again.
- And the whole process gets repeated.

It is a vicious cycle and it doesn't take long for you to get absolutely sick of this! Then you begin to wonder whether you're being taken advantage of; whether or not you are being made a fool of!

So Peter asks Jesus, “*Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me; up to seven times?*” (Matthew 18:21) In other words – Hey Lord - what is the limit? How much of this are we supposed to take? He has understood what Jesus was saying and he wants to be a forgiving person, but he wants to know: what are the limits on Christian forgiveness?

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We are not doormats! What Peter has forgotten – that at the heart of the Gospel - wherever there's repentance there will always be forgiveness!

Jesus immediately corrects Peter's question saying "*I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.*" (Matthew 18:22). What Jesus is saying is that is, forever; more times than you can count! Unlimited forgiveness because that's what God's forgiveness is like! We really shouldn't be keeping score!

Today - society, Hollywood, and the popular media teach us that it's heroic to take revenge. We see Arnold Schwarzenegger, Bruce Willis, Chuck Norris and others making a living promoting revenge. Jesus teaches us that it is truly more heroic to conquer revenge, to forgive, even if it costs us a whole lot! We are called to leave revenge for God's final judgment. Jesus shows us that in a very graphic way why this is the case. He tells a parable that illustrates why Jesus expects unlimited forgiveness from us: because we've been enormously forgiven!

This is a message that is often repeated in the Gospels: "*But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.*" (Matthew 6:15) Jesus also said "*Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.*" (Matthew 7:1-2) So we must NOT take this lightly. Our forgiveness is in a sense dependent on our willingness to forgive others.

So does this mean we have to earn our forgiveness? Does forgiving others make us worthy to be forgiven? Not at all! We need to notice that the servant's debt is forgiven right at the very beginning. That fact is the cornerstone of parable! Secondly the debt is so great that no amount of forgiveness of others' debts could ever equal it. So there's no sense that his response to his fellow servant somehow repays his own debt. No - the forgiveness or remission of that debt is a free gift from the king, with absolutely no strings attached. It is an example of GRACE!

This servant failed to live the kind of life the king expected. This king is merciful and he expects others to show the same mercy. If the servant were a true follower of the king then he'd show mercy and forgiveness. **Mercy means not getting what we deserve.**

Let me give you an illustration: A little boy disobeyed his mother and his conscience began to hurt him, and he was sneaking up to his room when his mother saw him. "Where are you going, Frank?" she asked. "To my room to talk to God." The mother asks "Is it something you can't tell me?" And so Frank explained "Yes, it is. You'll just scold and punish me while God will forgive me and forget all about it."

What a great reminder of just how great God's love and mercy is and a warning about the need to respond appropriately, demonstrated by our attitude to others. While we must never condone sin or ignore it, when the particular sin is against us, we need to follow the example of our Lord and King, to forgive unconditionally and without limit. We are to be so overwhelmed by God's love and mercy that we can't help but be merciful and loving toward the one who

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wronged us. If we are “Kingdom people” then the way we relate will be the way the King relates. Our lives should show that there are no limits to forgiveness in God’s kingdom. Jesus said it all in teaching us how to pray – *“forgive us our trespasses - as we forgive those who trespass against us.”* It is NOT about keeping score!