

Matthew 18:21-35  
“We Shall Breathe Free”

Forgive or suffer the consequences. Jesus’ parables are by their nature difficult to get at. They are stories told by a cantankerous rabbi leading a bunch of surly fishers and derelicts around the backwoods revolutionary hotbed of the largest empire on the planet.

Perhaps we missed something. Did we really ever think that following Jesus would make us respectable? This is really a question I have for the church as I have known it. How did it come to pass that the most upstanding and proper people in our communities become the default image of what it looks like to be a Christian?

I have rarely regretted the opportunity to be in the presence and power of people who see our world all sideways and upside down. One of my favorite theological conversation partners is a seventy something year old guitar player who looks and sounds like Waylon Jennings. Gene is such a wonderful character.

I first met Gene because of a 2004 New Year’s Eve gig at a supper club in Harper, Kansas playing with Martina McBride’s dad. It only got more weird from there. Gene grew up in the Central Valley in California. His dad was a traveling Pentecostal evangelist with a side job as a fruit picker. Gene learned to play guitar in the back seat of their car in an orchard where they lived during the summer while picking fruit and in front of churches as they manifested the Holy Spirit on Sunday nights.

Gene and I became friends immediately. We meshed musically and just got each other. I played with Gene for ten years until we moved to Saint Louis. I enjoyed his cantankerous nature and off-the-wall ideas.

He quit a perfectly good construction job when his kids were young to live in a bus as he toured around Texas and Louisiana playing music. He has been in a church a total of I think three times in the last forty years. Each time because of me. But one would be a fool if they assumed he would not be a formidable biblical thinker.

I hope all the time to see the world and faith more like Gene does. I hope that following Jesus makes me more and more suspect to properness and more surly. I hope that I see the waters, as they say, in need of troubling more often than of calming.

Parables are such tools of troubling the waters. Jesus is in no mood to smooth everything over. Parables are upending and dislocating by design. They are misdirecting and discomfiting on purpose.

So, if we come at a parable with a proper focus looking for tidy nuggets of personal morality, we ourselves might be in need of a little troubling.

Peter came to this conversation with a need for a little troubling. “Surely there is an adequate level of forgiveness that is enough” he asks. And this is where Jesus sets the trap. He gives a rather simple answer. Forgive more times than you can count. Simple enough. Always forgive and never stop forgiving. And this is where proper Christianity kicks in. Forgiveness becomes its own competition. Who can forgive more, more often, and fast enough? That will be the best Christian. See there, all done. Easy.

CHARLOTTE CLEGHORN troubles that kind of forgiveness:

“Forgiveness means to release, to let go of the other. Forgiveness is not denying our hurt. When we minimize what has happened to us, gloss over it, tell ourselves that it was not really that bad, we cannot really forgive.

Forgiveness is a possibility only when we acknowledge the negative impact of another person’s actions or attitudes in our lives, for example, when children who have been abused by parents can acknowledge what their parents did.”

Forgiveness is not a blanket that covers over what happened. Not being able to forgive is not a personal moral failing. If there is no space to speak the pain of harm, there is not enough room for real forgiveness.

And this gets to our parable. It appears on the surface to be a tale about an ever-forgiving Lord. And as long as the slaves below forgive in the same way they will receive salvation. However. If they do not forgive as the Lord so graciously gives it, then they will suffer his wrath.

Is this really a picture of the kingdom of God, thanks be to God, Amen? It has been my experience that the one who benefits most from this whole forgiveness Ponzi scheme is the Lord of the story. The slaves, the ones who are economic prisoners to the wealth of the Lord are left to struggle amongst the scraps in a mountain of debt. And if they fail the test then they will surely pay with their life.

For a note of clarification, the amount of debt owed by the first slave is off the charts. Regardless of how the math is worked out, it is a massive number. Now, according to our story the two slaves are working on behalf of the Lord. The word slave is a tricky one in this case. Some translations use servant. Slave is probably more accurate, but that is not to say that the slavery in the Bible is the same thing as the chattel slavery as perpetrated in the United States, which was based on racial constructs and permanent.

Slavery in this case was based more commonly on a dysfunctional economic system, which often still framed itself on bigotry. It is more similar to corporate farms exploiting migrant labor from Mexico and Central America by withholding most wages for bogus living expenses, while at the same time threatening to deport people if anyone complains. The entire livelihood and legal status is controlled by the farm, which may or may not have used legal means to acquire the work of laborers. They are stuck in a system that requires their exploitation to be profitable and will cast them out whenever trouble comes.

So, thinking in those terms, with labor likely being exploited by the Lord, let’s get a grasp on how much ten thousand talents is. Let’s say that the first slave is being paid around minimum wage, let’s say \$8.00/hr. This all assumes that the slaves are not being exploited in other ways.

If that person worked 12 hours per day, 6 days a week, That’s 40 hours of regular pay and 32 hours of overtime. That would be \$704/week for 50 weeks, or \$35,200/year. Oh, and don’t forget that one talent is roughly 20 years of labor measured by time. 10,000 talents would be equal to 200,000 years of low-paid labor. Based upon my wage example at \$8.00/hr., that is 7.04 billion dollars.

What is Jesus even talking about with this parable? If this is God’s idea of paradise, who even needs it? I don’t.

The system of debt and exploitation of labor, which required a violent system of control to maintain order for the Lord, inevitably leads to one slave, who has by sheer luck been freed from his insurmountable debt, to now see himself more on the level of the Lord, and he intuitively knows that in order to maintain this system, which stands a slight chance of benefiting him now, reaches out and grabs another slave by the neck.

What would compel a person to kneel on the neck of another human being until they are dead? Fear, I think. Irrational fear, but still fear. Hatred disguising fear perhaps. Fear that the economic and social system that could have crushed them, but for the luck of birth did not.

It is the realization that a true reckoning of the sin perpetrated would render forgiveness impossible because the debt of that sin of racism in the United States is so great that it would bring down the very society that gives some of us just enough space to at least catch our breath.

The feeling of powerlessness within the dominant white framework of the United States, to understand and make meaningful change in response to the treatment of and experience of people of color, is debilitating.

We know that if we don't play along with the system as it currently operates, we might very well lose the illusion that we may someday be the Lord, or at least safe. But until that delusional and deadly reality is dealt with, forgiveness for what has happened will have no real home among us. Forgiveness will still hold the threat of being taken back and used to yet grab the neck of another.

It is amazing to me that the very person that received a forgiveness of a 7 billion dollar debt for no reason reacts with such malice and fear. But it is not surprising that the worst instincts among us rise to the surface at that moment. Irrational hate and fear of being held accountable for the debt that has occurred is almost too much to bear, especially when we soon learn that the forgiveness was conditional.

I think the reason that the whole system of forgiveness in the story could not hold together is precisely because it was a system that required arbitrary forgiveness in order to exist. If there was no labor exploitation, no insurmountable debt, then there would be no need for conditional forgiveness. The Lord in the story needed to hold forgiveness as a transactional tool. The Lord needed to be able to pull the strings. He could choose to create a charity and be a forgiveness philanthropist while still maintaining the whole system that created his wealth and the need for his philanthropy.

To dismantle the debt driven, violence provoking, suffocating world of the Lord would render the Lord as just another human being. And what would the world be like without a Lord on top?

Now tell me this story of Jesus is describing the kingdom of God. I think Jesus is giving Peter back what he was asking for. Peter wanted a rule of forgiveness that would prescribe an adequate amount of forgiveness in order to please the Lord, God in this case.

To be honest, that is the exact way that most Christians think about God. Virtually every commentary of this story in church history, that I have seen anyway, uses this story as a representation of the church and God. God, or Jesus at the end of days, will hold us accountable for the amount of forgiveness we give, even though we are not supposed to keep track ourselves, which makes it difficult to know if we have forgiven enough of something that is supposed to be infinite.

The church has almost always said two things at once. Forgiveness is free and unconditional, and forgiveness is conditional on how much you give of it yourself. We have read this story as a model kingdom instead of seeing it as a distorted nightmare in the image of Peter's question.

This is why this moment of racial strife and turmoil feels so threatening to some of us. Everything that many of us value, law-and-order when it benefits us, the promise of social mobility, the American Dream, boot-strapping it... It requires the price of grabbing others by the neck and squeezing the life out of them.

As the common protest chant puts it: The whole damn system is guilty as hell!

We can talk all day long about reforming this or that, about forgiving the past or more conveniently just moving on and getting over it. But the hope of Christ will require a reckoning of the whole thing, which for the Lord of the story, or those who fancy themselves potential Lords, will threaten everything that maintains the need for Lordships altogether.

Our culture looks a lot like the example Jesus gives and we have convinced ourselves in the name of Jesus that this is the way God would have it. But it is a nightmare that all of us are perhaps finally awakening too. It is a small dream of just enough forgiveness as Peter asked for.

But God does not need to be this Lord, or rule over any kingdom that cares more for the measuring of forgiveness than the living of it. The kingdom of God needs no Lords, Just Christ as one of us.

The Gospel of Jesus, if it is worth believing at all, should reveal to us, within us, just exactly the level of forgiveness and reconciliation that the kingdom of God is going to take. This parable is not a promise but a threat in honor of the smallness of the Gospels of our own creation.

I do not know what it is going to take to make right what has been wrought for centuries, through slavery, Jim Crow, continued legal slavery in prisons, public executions by state violence. What I do know is that this Lord of white supremacy is no longer needed or welcome. I am done with this nightmare. I want a kingdom of God that does not need a king.

I want a God that has some skin in this game, who is willing to die for a different dream. I want a commonwealth of God built on the dreaming of a Spirit that is so far beyond my biggest and wildest dreams that I laugh at the audacity of it.

If we could will it as so it would definitely be too small. Anything less is not worthy of our worship or faith. Any God that needs this current mess to be relevant is not a God at all, but a devil.

This is the Jesus I want to spend my time with and follow. A Jesus that sees forgiveness not only as something we do but the way to fullness of life where human thriving will not rely on the rationing of forgiveness; where we don't see others as a threat to our joy, but the source of God's joy; where will not hold others by the throat, under the knees of our fear, but will kneel to lift up when one of us has fallen.

I pray we find such Jesus among us, as the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. This radical, surly, improper and troubling Christ is our hope of a world to come now and forever. Amen.