***St. James Episcopal Church, Louisa***

***Matthew 18: 21-35***

***Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost***

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***September 13, 2020***

***This Complicated Business of Forgiveness***

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Today’s Gospel text is difficult one. Or maybe it is a simple one. So simple and straight forward that I struggled for three days on how to preach it. Preachers jokingly say that we all only have one or two sermons that we preach a different way each week. And today’s Gospel text would qualify as one of those sermons.

Each of today’s lectionary texts point us toward a theme, that of forgiveness and of God’s never-failing love for us.

In deciding to preach on today’s Gospel text, which is a parable, you have to decide a few things -to preach the parable and let it stand alone, or to preach the parable in the larger context of the Gospel text. Matthew has 23 parables - 11 of which are unique and are not found in the other Gospels. The parable in today’s passage is one of the unique ones. It is commonly referred to as the Unforgiving Servant. Which is a nice way to tidy it up for us, but I am not sure is an accurate description of what the parable is about. The reference to the Unforgiving Servant in its description alludes to how we should forgive others and not be like the unforgiving servant who had been forgiven and then didn’t forgive.

And while that reference does sum up some of the parable, it falls short of the greater lesson of the parable.

This parable is about abundance. God’s extravagant abundance of grace and mercy that is shown to us.

The text is a parable, and parables are not unique to the Gospels.

They are a form of literary prowess, but Jesus seems to have perfected them. He often spoke in parables in the Gospels.

Parables introduce us to an alternate world. They jar us and present us with something that is unusual, an alternative way of living and being that can seem in many ways un-liveable. They shock us into looking at what an entirely different world would look like.

This parable opens up to Peter and the disciples, and to us, an alternate universe. It is hard to tame this parable. It brings to the forefront of the utter differentness of the Gospel.

Peter asks, “Lord, how often must I forgive my brother if he wrongs me?”

Peter suggests the biblically prescribed answer: seven?

Jesus, however, stretches the legal requirement to breaking: not seven but seventy x’s seven or, in common parlance, always. He then goes on to tell a story, a parable, about one who has just been forgiven an unimaginable amount yet cannot forgive another what is a trifling sum by comparison.

He describes a slave who owed a king 10,000 talents. This is such a large number that to even think of one person owing this much to another borders on the absurd. In Jesus’ time, the annual tax revenue for all of Herod the Great’s territories was 900 talents. One individual owing another 10,000 talents in those days is like saying that someone owes another person the amount of the federal budget in modern times. An absurd number, an “unforgivable” debt. Unforgiveable, except it is God’s kingdom. In Jesus’ parable, in God’s kingdom, the king forgives the debt, the king shows compassion on the one who somehow amassed this ridiculous debt. In so doing, it is he, the king, that is freed.

The slave is not freed. He fails to understand one of the basic principles in God’s kingdom, one that Jesus taught us from the very beginning when he taught us to pray. “Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.” It is in that last part that we are freed, and in Jesus parable, the forgiven slave fails to understand this and so is doomed to a life of bondage.

Forgiveness is a difficult topic. To speak of forgiveness assumes a hurt - a wrong doing - something has occurred that needs to be forgiven. And therefore, it has most likely stirred up some emotion. And when emotions are stirred - people are not generally their best selves. It becomes hard to think clearly when we are so angry and so hurt, we aren’t able to calm ourselves enough to think rationally and often we allow our emotions to dictate our responses instead of being able to give a calm, thought through response.

We live in a world that contains suffering, suffering that diminishes the human spirit, and sometimes in that suffering forgiveness can be difficult for us. If we have been wronged or hurt, sometimes seemingly without reason or explanation, forgiveness can seem to be unattainable.

We also live in a world that contains radical grace and radical compassion. Radical compassion is shown to us in the death of Jesus Christ, radical grace is made available to us in the resurrection.

Our ability to live in this broken world is dependent on our willingness to trust in this compassion and grace.

It is important in our reading of the Gospel lesson that our attention is not focused on the end of the text We can be shaped by a popular religious culture more interested in hell than healing, and get fixated on the end, where God's response to the unforgiving heart is compared to the unrelenting punishment of an angry overlord.

This is hyperbolic exaggeration characteristic of a parable -- as absolutely no one lives up to the moral demanded -- meant to underscore the importance of forgiveness. Why? Because, as the parable makes clear, those who are unable to extend to others the mercy they have received from God are already ensnared, trapped, and doomed to a life of relentless calculations and emotional scarcity.

What Jesus was doing here was upending relationships and how we do relationships. It is not quantifiable anymore. The OT passages, “eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth” - clear retribution for wrongs made life so much simpler.

But now, what Jesus is sharing in this parable, speaks of an unimagineable extravagence in the act of forgiveness. It speaks to the kind of mercy that God has shown us. Extravagant. Without reason.

It would be nice to be able to stand here as your priest and to say that I forgive that way, but I am pretty sure mostly I don’t and possibly am not even capable of it. I would like to think I am. The thing with forgiveness though is that it is messy. It is a lot more of a process than a one time event. Hurt doesn’t just go away because we think it should. Offenses are not just forgotten - neither in our minds or our hearts.

The servant was forgiven by his master- immediately and without consequence. Jesus was speaking of how we are forgiven by God. Completely. Mercifully. Without limits.

So while I know that in my own skin I am not capable of this type of forgiveness - we live in a society where every wrong is tallied, counted, remembered - what this parable is speaking to is a different way of living and being in the world. A different way of being merciful as God has been merciful to us.

We are called as Christians to live into this compassion and grace, and to be freed by our own ability to forgive in this world of suffering. It is our only hope, but what a powerful hope it is. By living into this, by making God’s gifts of divine compassion and grace integral parts of our lives, the way we live and the way we view the world around us, we can live in this world. It is an extraordinary challenge sometimes, but it is a challenge we must face if we are to live in this broken world with the sense of God’s grace that we must come to rely on.

So as we look at the world around us on this day –we are reminded that we live in a broken world, a world that contains arenas that seem sometimes dominated by pain and misery, a world that contains hatred based upon unsupportable prejudices, and inexplicable distrust of our fellow children of God, a world where things can get so distorted that a group of people can convince themselves that the best way to serve their God is to hijack a bunch of airplanes and fly them into heavily occupied buildings.

In order to live in a world where this kind of radical suffering can and does take place, we must come to have a sense of the abundant love and grace given to us in God’s kingdom, a kingdom that Jesus Christ announced over and over was at hand. The only way that we can in any way be able to fathom the existence of this kind of radical suffering is to always know in our hearts and minds of the radical and abundant grace available in God’s kingdom. And part of this kingdom, part of this abundance, part of what Jesus Christ was talking about is what we read about in today’s gospel lesson, radical and abundant forgiveness. May it be so O Lord. Amen.