

Getting It Right: Standing Up, Stepping Out

Matthew 18:21-35

Intro

This morning's passage is the classic example of a story whose contextual theme (that of forgiveness) is universal but whose literary punch is lost because the culture that it is immersed within does not translate all that smoothly into our vernacular. In the case of these verses, the punch is delivered through monetary units.

For example, while some of us might know the exchange rate between the dollar and the yen, or the euro, we have no idea how many dollars it takes to equal a denarii, let alone a talent.

However, if we are to understand the scope of the situation that is being placed before us, knowing what these monetary rates equate to is exactly what we are called to do.

Therefore, here's your cheat sheet as to what you are about to hear. Now while we cannot be completely certain as to the value of each of these units, this is the best guess that is out there. The talent was the largest monetary value that the Roman Empire minted and it was traditionally viewed as an amount that was only handled by the extremely wealthy or, as the case may be, governments.

For example: according to a Roman historian of the day, the tax that was collected from all of the people of Judea, Idumea, and Samaria was 600 talents. This incredibly large amount pales in comparison to the 10,000 talents that we are told the indebted slave owes.

What this means is that what is owed measures in the billions, or in the literary world, represents a figure that could never be repaid.

The second coin that we encounter is the denarii. It was a silver Roman coin that represented a worker's daily wage. It also took 6000 denarii to equal one talent. As we will be told in this passage, there is another debt that is owed: that of 100 denarii. This is also a whole lot of money to repay, but it can be done, especially when compared to the debt that was previously spoken of.

These comparisons, as well as the different reactions that take place in regards to each of the respective debts allows us the opportunity to ask the question, if I have forgiven this much, how am I to act as I then move forward in my life in the world? The scripture reads this way.

Matthew 18:21-35

²¹ Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" ²² Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

²³ "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴ When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; ²⁵ and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. ²⁶ So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of

his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.'²⁹ Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.'³⁰ But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt.³¹ When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place.³² Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.'³³ Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?'³⁴ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt.³⁵ So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

"Getting It Right: Standing Up, Stepping Out"

When I selected this passage, I thought that I had a pretty good feel for where it was going to take me in terms of the sermon. Then I sat down and actually started to put the sermon together and I realized that where I thought it was headed held very little connection to where it was actually going.

I started out by focusing on the issue of forgiveness. This is the point that jumps out at us initially due to the fact that we hear the words, "the lord released him and forgave him of his debt."

A debt that was worth billions, forgiven.

However, I became transfixed by the symmetry that played out first by the slave, and then to that very same slave. It starts out with him on his knees, in front of his lord, begging, "have patience with me, and I will pay you everything."

Think about that statement and the percentage of likelihood that it could occur.

This was a debt that measures, at least today, in the billions of dollars and he was a common day laborer. There was no way that he could have ever repaid that debt, and yet, this is what he places before his lord.

So what does the lord do? Does he put the slave into jail and sell off the slaves family and all of the positions that he has so as to recoup as many of the lost funds as possible?

No. Instead he forgives him. Says, "you're free and clear. Your debt is forgiven. Go and live the rest of your life free of the burden of such a responsibility."

Think of the reaction the slave must have had. Or said in a different way, if you were in that person's shoes, how would you react? Here's one possible example, said in the stone cold quiet of a disbelieving mind: "No way! How could such a thing happen? How is this possible?" Then sheer joy. I imagine the man, I imagine myself, shouting at the top of my lungs; hugging every innocent bystander that gets in his way; displaying the light of an individual who was been given a new lease on life.

As we get started in a new program year, one of the things that this passage caused me to think about is just how much God loves us. Because here's the thing: what does forgiveness derive from? Where does the ability and the desire to forgive come from?

It comes from love; a love that is greater than what you are owed, a love that is stronger than any of the damage that the debt has created; a love that will not abate.

The reason that we gather as a community of faith, is because we, as people who are in need of forgiveness, have been embraced, in some way, by a love that is greater than the debt that we have created.

Sin, those actions and inactions that are contrary to the way of God, they separate us from one another and from the Almighty. It causes us to pile up a debt that could never be repaid by ourselves in multiple lifetimes, let alone our solitary life.

And if you are thinking that your particular wrongs really aren't all that bad: that isn't what we hear in scripture. What we hear in scripture is that any and all sin separates us equally from one another and the Divine: and there is no way to even that score in and of our own accord. Think of it like trying to jump the Grand Canyon ... while being tied at your ankles. It's not happening!

That's where we are at...and then a love reaches out in such a way to pay our debt (which is the sacrifice of Jesus on a cross) and we are forgiven. God loves us that much.

So again, our initial reaction is of blissful shock to the point of disbelief. That is why we gather together in this place: we recognize, even in some small way, that we are welcomed in that love.

I would be grateful if this is where the story ends, but as we know, not only from our passage, but absolutely from our own lives, we struggle to stay in that place of loving forgiveness for long. We are a fallen and broken people, and when we see wrongs against us, one of our basic leanings is to try and get what we feel is owed, ... even when we have just been embraced by a love that allows us to be forgiven.

This is where the scripture passage picks back up because before the servant who has been forgiven so much makes it beyond the courtyard walls, sees a fellow slave; a slave who happens to owe him some money: a pretty decent amount, but when compared to the amount that had just been forgiven, almost nothing; a whisper in the midst of an oceans never-ending roar.

In an instant, this slave who has just been jumping for joy at the freedom he has been granted, grabs the other slave by the throat, beginning to choke the breath out of him, and snarls, "pay what you owe". The other slave falls to his knees and says the exact same thing that his lender has said only a few seconds earlier, "have patience with me, and I will pay you". Does he show the same mercy that he had just received? Does he recognize the opportunity that he has to live out the new life that he has been granted?

No. He throws the fellow slave into prison.

The difficult thing to admit, however, is that all of us, regardless of where we are in this sanctuary, or for that matter if we're not in this sanctuary at all, we are guilty of at least some version of this misstep: where we rejoice in our own loving forgiveness, but then fail to show it when we have the opportunity to do so. We all fall short of the example of Christ that we have been called to follow. As we just mentioned, we are sinners; sinful by nature. If we do not acknowledge that reality, we ignore one of the basic theological tenets that we stand upon. All of us are guilty.

However, just because we are guilty does not mean that we are a lost cause. This fact pulls us back to the base theme of the passage: the love of God as experienced through the forgiveness of God.

Once again, think about how indebted that slave was. Billions in arrears. There was no way that he could ever dig himself out of the whole that he had placed himself in, and yet, even in such a deplorable state, with no possible hope available, hope was given; a reprieve was extended; forgiveness was granted; love was shown.

Even in those times when we are lamentably and completely guilty, if we go before God and ask for forgiveness, it will be granted. What a miracle. What an opportunity to start again and live a life that is free of the sin that all of us are responsible for; free to live a life that exudes the love, grace, guidance, and forgiveness that have been shown to each of us.

So what are we going to do with that freedom? And this morning I ask that question from a congregational perspective. What are we going to do with that freedom? Are we going to sit quietly and do the things that we are comfortable with, those activities that we feel safe in, loving the people whom we know, you know, well enough?

Or are we going to stand up and live something else, a life that is radical, a life that may seem counterintuitive to the sanctuary that so many think of in regard to the church, especially the mainline church? A life that takes steps toward the miraculous sort of forgiveness that was exhibited (and then completely trampled upon) in our passage this morning?

Alright, so some of you are probably wondering what I'm talking around. I was able to have lunch with a few of my colleagues this past week and after about six minutes I found myself with my head literally in my hands as I heard description after description of congregations on the brink of some form of collapse. Now finances are the easiest thing to point at and say, 'there's the problem' but the reality is that the finances are the symptom of congregations that are struggling to stand up and love, serve, forgive, if they are able to do it at all. We certainly have been feeling some of that in different ways as we have talked about seeking out the 'what's next' that God has in store for us. We've been talking about how we need to stand up and live out a life in the midst of the greater community that displays service, love, and forgiveness. And there certainly have been more than a few days when we have looked around and thought, 'we're okay...but we're not thriving.'

Well, I don't know if you were here during announcements or not, but some of those opportunities to stand up and maybe even step out as a congregation are starting to manifest themselves. Sign up to be on the call list to go serve on Hurricane rebuild. Strongly consider participating in the Hope Force training that will take place in March. Hop into one of the small groups for a six week stint (you've got quite a few options available for you!). Come to the Dinner on the 5's,...and then bring someone else! Sign up to help pack relief packets over in Doylestown at the end of October.

And that's just some of the 'insider' stuff.

Because remember, this radical life is meant to be lived beyond these walls. Show and practice kindness, mercy, forgiveness, and grace (yes, even to those who might not deserve it – wait, isn't that part of the scripture lesson for today? Yes it is!). When you have the opportunity to share love with a kind word, or a simple smile, offer it. When you need prayer, ask for it. When others around you need prayer,

provide it...fervently. Stand up. Stand out. Get it right, or at the very least, get it closer to that which is of God.

Brothers and sisters, we are called to be a people of faith.

Therefore, let us be joined together so that we might be able to support each other as we serve the Lord in every circumstance that we face so that we are able to remind ourselves, and yes, remind those around us what being the Church in the world should always mean.

Very simply, since we have been called to be a people of faith, so let us live by that faith! Let us not be controlled by our fears, our biases, our hypocrisies, our sinfulness that leads us to be separated and broken, seeking out the justice of man instead of living out the grace that we have received from God.

It can be real easy to receive one thing (loving forgiveness) and then not share it when it is our turn.

And that's why we gather together to be reminded of who we are and who we can be in God by following the leading of God's Spirit to stand up and step out. The opportunities are there and they are coming.

After Sermon Prayer

Lord, You have called us to acknowledge our sinfulness and bow before You so that we might be able to be washed clean in Your forgiveness. This freedom allows us the opportunity to grow beyond our fallen nature and begin to get it right in You. Lord, we thank You for this opportunity: and opportunity that we do not deserve. Lead us in the ways that we should go, the things that we should say. Show us how, in and through You, we can get it right. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.