

Living Forgiveness Sermon Series 4 of 4: The Movement of Living Forgiveness

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Crozet United Methodist Church

Second Sunday of Lent - February 28, 2010

Matthew 18:23-35

*“For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; 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. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. 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.’ Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. 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. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”*

From time to time, I am asked to write a letter of recommendation for one of our young people who is applying to college. I believe that I am asked to write these letters because I know the applicant, and because I will presumably say nice things about him or her, which is exactly what I do. I discuss how the applicant is a team-player, how she is committed to her spiritual development in a way that inspires the community of faith, how he demonstrated great fortitude doing hard work on the mission trip, how she is mature beyond her years, how he is disciplined and determined, how this young person is not only deserving of a spot in the freshman class, but how the class would be better for having this young person in it.

I love writing these letters. It is a great honor. We have exceptional young people in this congregation, and it is a privilege to be able to tell the story of what God has done and is doing in someone’s life. However, I have never been afforded the opportunity to write the letter I really dream of writing. That is, until now:

Dear Dean of Admissions.

Greetings in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. I hope you are doing well. I am writing to you on behalf of this [applicant] and why I believe he is worthy of a spot in next fall’s entering class. I have known this applicant since the summer of 2005, when I became his pastor, and in that time, I have seen him evolve into one of the finest, most subversive agents of the Revolution. Through his dedication to the Lord’s teachings, attendance to the means of grace, and the power of the Holy Spirit dwelling in him, he has shown great promise in his emerging abilities to overthrow the powers of this world.

Of course, I could not have lavished such praise on this young man when I first met him. He was angry, bitter, and quite jaded back in those days, but who would not be, given what was done to him (I trust that he has shared his great matter with you, as it was very formative in his life). However, in this community of faith, he has been accepted. He has learned forgiveness; not only forgiving others, but he has learned to receive

forgiveness as well. Through our life together in this community of faith, he has even learned that difficult practice, both a discipline and a fine art, of forgiving oneself.

However, what makes me the proudest of this young man is the way in which he has become an agent of reconciliation within his own home, his school, his community, and even in his church. He understands how to invite those who are adversaries, even enemies, to come together at table, to openly discuss their passions, their concerns, and even share their wounds in a way that is full of grace and healing. When asked why he so openly enters into the pain of others, he responds simply that he understands his Christian vocation to help others experience what God's grace has provided him.

Now, I must warn you about this young man. As I said earlier, he is a member of the Revolution, and he has been since his initiation, when received the waters of baptism, and he is, in fact, a great danger to the powers of this world. He is a fighter, and he knows his weaponry well. Let me reassure you that the weapons with which he fights are not the crude weapons which are so common in this world. He fights with what Dr. King calls "the most durable power," which is the power of love. In fact, his favorite quote is from King's "The Most Durable Power" sermon: "Always be sure that you struggle with Christian methods and Christian weapons. Never succumb to the temptation of becoming bitter. As you press on for justice, be sure to move with dignity and discipline, using only the weapon of love. Let no man pull you so low as to hate him. Always avoid violence."

Now, let me warn you: should you admit this extraordinary young person into your program, you must understand that his commitment to peace, justice, and reconciliation, and his commitment to fighting only with love does not make him any less of a revolutionary than one who fights with guns and bombs. This is not love as a *feeling*. I'm talking about love as *power*. You must understand that because his weapon is "the most durable power," his power comes from the God who will not be mocked.

Therefore, should your institution be satisfied with the polarized society in which we now live; should your institution be complacent with the divisions that exist between the haves and the have-nots, politicians who put plank, platform, and posturing ahead of peace with justice, complacent with those who whip home fires into roaring flames of dissent and division for causes that do not unite our commonalities but rent asunder the very fabric of our nation. If your institution's reach does not exceed its grasp, so that you do not dream of a day when the old divisions die, when reconciliation rules, and when justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream, then this revolutionary, like our other revolutionaries, will shine like a radiant light in which you will be exposed, by his daily acts of shalom, one act of forgiveness, one act of reconciliation, one witness to the liberation of our God in Jesus Christ, at a time.

This young person is not only deserving of a spot in the freshman class, but the class would be better for having this young person in it.

Grace and peace,  
Douglas Forrester  
Pastor and Fellow Subversive of Crozet United Methodist Church

It's not a bad dream, is it that the church of Jesus Christ should be known first and foremost, for producing the kind of people that letter describes.

This morning's text picks up immediately where last Sunday's reading stopped, Jesus has just finished teaching on what to do if someone in the church sins against you, laying out several steps involving wider and wider circles within the community of faith, designed to lead the offended parties to forgiveness and reconciliation. As was noted last week, Peter responds to this teaching with a question: "How many times must I forgive someone in the church who sins against me?" and

Jesus responds saying that we are to forgive (depending on the translation used) either 77 times or “seventy times seven” times.

Jesus then tells a three-act parable about a king and two of his officers, saying “For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; 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. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.”

A talent was the largest monetary unit in Jesus’ culture. Its value was equal to just under 45 pounds of silver. Another way to look at it was that it was worth 6,000 drachmas, or 15 years of manual labor. This servant owes 10,000 of these. Ten-thousand was considered to be the largest number in this culture; it is from the name for this number that we derive the English word *myriad*. This poor servant owes a myriad of lifetime wages to the king. The annual tax revenues of all of the territories of Herod the Great was 900 talents. The amount of debt in this parable would be greater than the tax revenues of all of Syria, Judea, Samaria, and Phoenecia combined.

So the servant in this text could die or go to prison, but he could never, ever, repay the debt. He thinks he can. In desperation, he pleads with the king: “Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything!” The king has pity on him, and his wife and his children are freed, and they are able to keep their possessions, and that unimaginable debt is forgiven.

Yet the first person he sees after the debt is forgiven is one of his fellow servants who owes him 100 denarii; one hundred days wages, some 1/600,000th of the debt the first servant just had forgiven by the king. The second servant begs with the same words as the first, and he receives the same punishment that the first servant just avoided.

And then we remember that this is a parable, and in this parable, the king is God and the two servants are members of the Christian community. The hypocrisy of this text is obscene, yet it powerfully reminds us as the community of faith to remember that we only wear the mark of Christ, that we only claim that he claims us, because we’ve been forgiven a tremendous debt as well, and that our lives are to lived as people who exemplify the our own prayers that God will forgive us, as we forgive those who trespass against us.

What if the church of Jesus Christ was known, first and foremost, not for the beauty of our architecture, the colorful stained glass, the glory of our music, the passion of our preaching, the practicality of our programs, the size of our budget, the capacity of our buildings, the soundness of our doctrine, the efficiency of our polity, or even the availability of our worship. What if we were known first and foremost as the place where one goes to experience peace and reconciliation, within one’s own life, between one and another, and between one and God?

What if church were a place known not for what one can “get out of it,” but instead by the wounded and the burdens one is able to lay down here?

What if we, as the people who know what great grace has been shown to us by God were defined by how we lead others to that place of grace and forgiveness?

What if forgiveness and reconciliation were not simply something we *do*, but a movement, *the* movement that defines us in the name of the one who cared and cares enough to give his life, that we might be reconciled to one another, and reconciled to God?

People of Crozet United Methodist Church: what then?

Gloria In Excelsis Deo.