

Sept 13th 2020 St Michael's Breinton and weekly email sermon.

Matthew 18:25-35

If you have been following the Gospel over the past few weeks you will recall we have been wrestling with some deeply troubling matters: the use of power by the church and by each of us as Christians; the power to forgive or to not to forgive; the power to hold back forgiveness until someone is really sorry.

These things trouble us on every conceivable level of our lives.

- Our children, fighting, because a sibling has done something wrong and tales have been told and the wounded party demands that we as parents mete out punishment.
- Years of pent up hostility that has eaten away at my peace, because my life's partner keeps on doing the one thing they know annoys me.
- The hurt and distress caused when a marriage partner breaks faith and gambles away the family's assets; or has an affair with a younger model; and they refuse to make restitution or admit guilt.
- Anger, fear and trauma when we are told that the person who raped me or attacked me has been granted parole and is out in society again.
- Rage against injustice and racism when innocent people are racially profiled and brutalised and murdered because they struggled against arrest.

These and many other wrongs wound us and damage us, both as individuals and as a society.

One of the earliest lessons that we learn in life is that when it comes to bad behaviour and wrong-doing, life consists of a balance sheet. On the one side are our merits - the things we do that are right. On the other side are our deficits - our failures, our wrongdoings. And at the end of the day, these two need to be made to add up. Those of you who are good at accounts will know how this works. The deficit column and the credit column MUST be made to add up. If they don't, something hasn't been taken "into account". And the matter must be investigated before closing the accounts for the day, and going peacefully to bed. Certainly before Santa Claus comes to see which children have been good or bad.

This image - that life is like a balance sheet - is as old as time. Jesus was certainly familiar with the image or metaphor - he used it repeatedly in several parables. And Paul uses it when he tackles the church at Ephesus about speaking the truth and not hurting each other - quoted to many newly covenanted couples - don't let the sun go down on your anger. Make amends - set things right - restore the accounts - before trying to rest at the end of the day. Then you will be able to rest peacefully, knowing that your accusations have been acknowledged, the source of the anger has been admitted, forgiveness - or justice - has been achieved.

This, deeply biblical principle, has become the bedrock of our justice system. We expect that our courts of law will investigate a wrongdoing, a confession will (hopefully) be obtained, appropriate punishment will be meted out or restitution made, the 'debt to society' will have been paid, and we, the wronged-against, the general public, and hopefully the news media, are satisfied.

For those of us who are Christian, it is a mirror image of the Divine law court. If we sin and confess our faults, God is faithful and just, and will forgive us our sins. The Church of England has, mostly, let go of the penance - doing something to appease wrath - from the confession, repentance, penance, forgiveness equation. Though it is still there within the sacrament of Confession, should one of you come to me after church this morning and ask to speak to me in confidence. 😊 But most Christians today accept that saying sorry to the one we have wronged - whether God or another human being - should, in the majority of cases, be enough. We are penitent. We will do our very best not to do it again. Therefore we deserve to be forgiven and let bygones be bygones. The debt is settled. Jesus has promised that it is so.

The other side of the coin also holds. If I'm NOT sorry, if I don't repent; or if I confront someone with their wrongdoing and they deny it against all the evidence; then forgiveness is withheld. The matter is NOT settled, the accounts can't be closed.

This is certainly the implications of last week's Gospel passage. For those of you who read it, or who heard Ruth or Sean preach last Sunday, you may recall - let me refresh your memory. Jesus is spelling out to the disciples exactly what the procedure should be, if there is a dispute or grievance between two church members. If you can't sort it out between you, ask others - jury, in effect, to listen to your complaint. And if the person STILL doesn't admit anything, ultimately, they are to be cast out of the church. But do your absolute best to first try and achieve restitution, peace, wholeness within the Body of Christ. Expulsion from community is an absolute last resort.

This always sounds harsh to our ears, because it is a reminder - very close to the bone - of the ultimate Divine law court. If I refuse to admit to God my wrongdoing, that I will be cast forth from the pearly gates into the pit of eternal fire. Accepting that this is a wonderfully graphic metaphor which Jesus exploits to the full, it still leaves us with the dis-ease that all may not necessarily be peace and light, in the afterlife.

Now, friends, I'm not going to go further down that road today - whether hell is literally so - or what might constitute eternity without God's grace - but the principle of Divine justice - and the Divine judge - is deeply embedded into the subtext of last week's gospel and today's gospel. And, as I have said, deeply embedded into our western societal notions of how justice in society should work.

But then Jesus comes along and seems to say the exact opposite. (Jesus often does this. It has kept biblical scholars busy for 2,000 years.) Peter has been stewing over this power to forgive and power to cast forth. He's probably been stewing it over since Jesus said he would be given the keys to the kingdom. According to Matthew, straight after Jesus drums into them the procedure for settling disputes, Peter questions him further.

Exactly how is this going to work, Lord? What if the offender says sorry, and peace is restored, and then they go and do it again? What if they keep on doing the same thing? What if, despite all our strictures and boundaries around them, they can't or won't change? What if they go on creating havoc and mayhem? Tell me how many times we should forgive, before drawing the line.

It is a very reasonable question. It is a reasonable question whether it is a private dispute, or a matter of public safety. And Jesus' answer leaves us aghast. In effect, Jesus is saying there should be no limit. It is, for us today as no doubt it was for Peter, mind-boggling.

Jesus then tells a parable - a story to illustrate what he means. The Parable of the Unjust Servant. You know how much God will forgive you because of his endless love and mercy?

Well that's how much you should forgive others. But then at the end of the parable Jesus appears to undo it all - he turns everything topsy-turvy again. If you don't forgive - and God will know because God knows everything - your forgiveness will be taken away from you and you will be expelled from God's presence into the metaphorical flames.

Hang on a minute - I thought you said God's love was boundless and unlimited? So there IS a bottom line? Friends we are right back at the beginning of this sermon, adding up our deficits and credits, trying to settle accounts with God, before the end of the day.

At this point, I need to nail my colours to the flag pole. I believe, with every fibre of my being, that hell in whatever form - eternal separation from the love of God - is a complete anathema to God. It is an affront to God's love. The very possibility of hell continuing in any form whatsoever is why Jesus came and destroyed death. God will do whatever it takes - forgive us 70 times 70 times 7 - to restore us back into God's arms and restore us back to wholeness of living. No matter who we are or what we have done.

I also believe that Jesus was doing in this parable what he often did - use extreme, over-the-top imagery and bizarre contrast of opposites in order to make a point. And the point he is making here is: forgiveness really is that big. That important.

If you withhold forgiveness you are not just going to destroy the life of the other person, you are going to destroy your own peace of mind as well. Do you want your life to be consumed by pursuing the debts and wrongs that another has done to you? Sleepless night calculating how many times they have said they are sorry and then gone and done it again? Vindictiveness disguised as the pursuit of justice?

And what if you do succeed in getting to wrongdoer locked up for an acceptable length of time. What then? Will that ever repay the debt - make right the wrong? That, my friends, is the sting in the tail of Jesus' parable. "Should you not have had mercy, as I had mercy? And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt." How will that happen, whilst he is incarcerated? Jesus has very cleverly, very wisely, made his point. It is not possible. All that is left to us - to God, is to cancel the debt in its entirety. To close the book.

It is not possible to balance the books, whether we have been expelled from community or not. Whether human or eternal. The debt can never be repaid, in the sense that we can never un-do what we have done. We can never un-do the hurt, the shame, the trauma that we have caused for others. No matter how repentant we are. In the end, after public and private acknowledgment has been made, after justice has been served, after safeguards have been put in place to prevent further damage, after physical and mental wounds have been replaced by scars, we need to, once again, be able to sleep peacefully at night. Both creditor and debtor. Trusting in the arms of God. For that to happen, the debt needs to be cancelled, by us and by God.

A final word. Every now and then, reading a Gospel story, I have a niggling suspicion that before Jesus answers a question, he looks deep into the eyes - the heart - of the person who has come to him. In this case, I can see Jesus, looking at Peter, and seeing his thoughts, his struggles with the promise of authority in the church, maybe his petty and jealous squabbles with some other disciples, and then answering with the answer that is needed. Peter, dazzled by status, needed to learn compassion, and mercy.

Jacky Sewell