

Forgiveness Isn't Pretty

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This week's scripture is a weird text chockfull of the kinds of things I wrestle with as a Christian. First is the common, but I think, mistaken reading of the "king" in this parable as referring to God, as if righteousness was dependent upon the payment of debts, as if God condoned slavery and the obscene accumulation of wealth from the labor of others, as if God required torture. Virtually all the sins of Christianity can be traced back to the notion that any human institution, be it political or religious, can claim divine authority.

This common misreading is nowhere more obvious than in our scripture for today. This king, especially, must not be read as a stand-in for God or as a spokesman for God's justice. The original Greek text clearly places an adjective before *basilei*, translated "king" in English. The word is *anthropos*. Recognize it (?) from high school biology class? It means "human." *Anthropos basilei*. This is a human king sitting atop a human power structure,

making decisions informed by the exigencies of that particular form of human governance. The king is not God, and God is not the king.

Second is the word translated as slave, *doulos*. The Greeks had slavery down to a fine art. According to Wikipedia, they had many words to describe different forms of slavery, like Eskimos have all those words to describe snow. Slavery was the water they swam in. A *doulos* slave was one who had no rights to ownership of any kind, one who was obligated to work only toward the interests of his master. The apostle Paul uses the exact same word in his foreword to his letter to the Romans to describe his relationship to Christ. How can such a person accrue debt in any sense of the word? The only indebtedness is the obligation to serve the master's interest, and the debt can only be paid in that service. Alright. Enough of my list of issues.

Let me say quickly that while some commentators read passages like this as dire warnings of God's judgment for bad behavior, in this case, being handed over to torturers for an indeterminate amount of time, I just

can't get around the humor in this story to read it that way. Remember the line in that old movie, Oh God!, where George Burns as God quotes an old saying, "God is a comedian playing to an audience too afraid to laugh?" I imagine a twinkle in Jesus' eye and an ironic twist in the corner of his mouth as he told this strange story. The "king" decided to settle accounts with his slaves. Given that the slaves were already legally bound to work only for the profit of the king, the ledger would have had to show that the king was indebted to the slaves.

But no, the king finds that one slave owes him ten thousand talents. How much is that? Well, a talent was not a unit of currency like a coin or a dollar bill. It was a unit of weight. When you measure money by weight you are talking a lot of money. I found an estimate online that ten thousand dollars in ones would weigh about 22 pounds. Ten thousand pounds in ones would be over 4 and a half million bucks.

It is estimated that one Roman talent equalled the accumulated wages of the average worker over a fifteen year period, about the working lifespan of someone living

in that time. So the slave owed the king the wages of ten thousand lifetimes. If we count back from today, he would have had to start borrowing from the king 150,000 years ago, around the time humans such as we just begin to appear in the fossil record.

But set aside the absurdity of this amount of debt; set aside the absurdity of the slave owing anything at all to his master other than his service. What would be the impact on the economy of a kingdom in that time, if, by forgiving that debt, that amount of wealth simply vanished? Would that kingdom survive such a hit to its bottom line? Now we are approaching what I think Jesus was actually asking when he told us to forgive.

What is the impact of forgiveness on our collective sense of justice? We generally think of justice as people getting what they deserve. Wealth, or poverty; sickness, or health; happiness, or misery. In a society ruled by justice, if it happens to you, naturally, it is because you deserve it. If what happens is not deserved, on the other hand, whether it is hardship, or privilege, then an injustice has occurred. It is interesting, isn't it, that we tend to see

justice more in terms of injustice. Justice itself is harder to see. It 'just is.'

The call to justice is the call to fix something, to heal something, and by healing I mean what modern medicine usually means. Give it a drug. Perform a procedure. (Better hope it is in your insurance plan.) We seek restitution for the victim, punishment for the perpetrator. Justice is either re-tributive or redis-tributive; it can hope for a brighter future, or long for a brighter past; it can be more or less effective, but the point is to make things better than they have proven themselves — in that moment of injury— to be.

What happens when this recognition that something is wrong and needs to be fixed is interrupted by an act of forgiveness? Do you see what Jesus is asking? And not just once, or seven times, or, let's be honest, seventy-seven times. Jesus is asking us to interrupt the call to fix something according to our currently operating sense of justice. He is asking us to set aside our very real experience of having been violated, our very real hope of having that violation seen and affirmed and addressed.

The gospels record him saying it many times in different ways. The parable of the workers comes to mind. A landowner hires laborers over the course of the workday and, at quitting time, he pays them all the same regardless of their total hours worked. Unfair! Workers Unite!

One of my favorite examples comes from the lectionary of a few weeks ago, the story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman. A woman from a country that for centuries identified as an enemy of Israel comes to Jesus because her little girl is “tormented by a demon.” Jesus, knowing the woman is not Jewish, tells her, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” The woman counters, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.” Jesus answers, “Woman, great is your faith,” and the little girl is healed.

The currently fashionable reading of this story is that the woman changes Jesus, i.e., God’s mind. Now I am all in for the changeability of God’s mind and the special power of women to change it, but for me, this story turns around the Greek word translated as “fair,” *kalos*. It bears the dual meaning of fair in the sense of just or equitable

and fair in the sense of pleasing, or aesthetically acceptable, or, if you will, pretty. Either Jesus is asking the woman to see — or is led himself by the woman into seeing — that the obstacle preventing the little girl from getting relief from her torment is nothing but a socially acceptable or politically correct notion of the way things ought to be.

The woman doesn't express outrage at being denied the healing power of Jesus. She doesn't howl in protest at essentially being called a bitch. She sets aside her pride and her faith in the benefits of political identity and the centuries' past of political animosity between Jesus' people and hers. She sets aside the need we all tend to have, that things should fit, or make sense, or look a certain way or be fair. Could there be a greater faith than that? And in that great faithful moment when she chose to face her situation without the supposed security of those closely held notions, when she abandoned the possibility of accusing Jesus of being unfair just in case he did not free her daughter from her tormentor, her daughter was freed.

I do not believe Jesus is asking us to choose forgiveness over justice. No, we are told in scripture too many times to “seek justice.” But to seek justice is not to demand or execute justice. It is the act of surrendering my personal or cultural sense of justice. It is the act of consciously allowing God’s healing power to fix not only my hurt at being violated, but quite possibly to fix the reason I experienced that violation in the first place. Forgiveness is none other than the act of seeking true justice.

There is one other example of forgiveness in the gospels that I want to point to. God, the creator, sustainer, and very definition of justice, put on flesh and was born as a first century Palestinian man named Jesus. After a few years of teaching and healing and loving his neighbors, he is declared an outlaw from justice by the religious and political leaders of the time, and receives the most severe penalty humans can deliver, a shameful, excruciating death. For many years, the very religion that claims his name has told us that Jesus’ death paid the debt the God-king requires of us his slaves, that Jesus’ death is the

mechanism by which we receive forgiveness, and that God's forgiveness is not the justice we deserve but somehow the deflection of that justice.

For me, Jesus' death is not the mechanism that brings about God's forgiveness. It is not the price paid to God on our account. It is the perfect example what we must be forgiven for. And here is the mystery of God's justice, which we can only struggle and fail to understand. We are forgiven. It is up to us to seek the justice in that forgiveness, and we do so not in any single act of forgiving when we have been hurt, but as a lifelong gesture. May God guide us to fulfill the command to seek first God's kingdom, God's righteousness, and God's justice. Amen.