

Kingdom Economics: Settling Accounts

*A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on September 17, 2017
on Matthew 18:21-35 at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

The story began like this: "there once was a famous monastery that had fallen on hard times. Only a few monks remained, and its buildings were deserted and in disrepair. There in the woods beside the monastery was a rabbi from the nearby town, who had built a small hut where he would go from time to time to be alone and pray. The monks did not speak to him, but they knew when he was near.

One day the abbot decided to visit the rabbi and seek his wisdom about the troubles that the monastery faced. The two greeted each other warmly, went inside the hut, and sat together in the two wooden chairs in the middle of the room, their time alternating between silence and prayer.

Then the abbot began to share his concerns about the monastery. The rabbi listened intently, nodding his head from time to time. When the abbot had finished, the rabbi said, "I know how it is. Fewer and fewer people come to the synagogue each year. I have no wisdom to share with you, but I know that you and the monks are holy men and do good works. Because of this, I also know that the Messiah is among you." With that, the rabbi bid the abbot goodbye.

The abbot left without a word and walked back to the monastery in a kind of daze as he pondered what the rabbi had said. When he arrived there, the monks surrounded him asking to know what wisdom the rabbi

shared. The abbot said with sorrow in his voice, "The rabbi had no wisdom to help us. As I was leaving he said something strange that I do not understand." He said, "The Messiah is among you." With that the abbot and the other monks went to their rooms for the night, confused but curious.¹

We hear today the gospel story of another rabbi who responded to a well-meaning question with confusing and curious answers. "If a *member of the church* sins against me," Peter asks Jesus, "how often should I forgive? Would seven times be enough: virtuous and satisfactory of the law?" Peter's question comes on the heels of a long exchange between Jesus and the disciples in the gospel of Matthew about behavior within the Christian community, about sheep gone astray, instructions for how to account for grievances between believers, and the reminder that "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." The translations of Jesus's instructions to Peter vary — some measure Jesus's exhortation to forgive seventy-seven, seven times seven, even seventy times seven — but regardless, his meaning is clear — forgive abundantly, lavishly, far beyond what you think would be right or legal! For that, he seems to suggest, is what we do and how we do it in the church. Abundant forgiveness is the kind of behavior we are to practice as Christians, the

¹ This is an adapted version of the first part of the story of "The Rabbi's Gift." The earliest version of this story may have been written by Francis Dorff, O. Praem, of the Norbertine Community of Albuquerque, New Mexico, March 1979.

type of ethos that binds us together as the people of God. To illustrate that point, Jesus tells a parable of a king and a slave, debts that are owed, and the insatiable power that comes with a measure of control.

I know you all came to worship today hungry for an economics lesson, so here's your lesson for the day! The Greek here tells of a slave indebted to a king in the amount of "ten thousand talents." Now this is a bit of a misnomer, as the terms "ten thousand" and "talent" both translate to mean 'the largest possible number!' One 'talent' was about 130 pounds of silver, and typically took a laborer 15 years to earn just one. So a debt of "10,000 talents" would demand 150,000 years of work for the average employee to pay it off! It's like saying that the amount of debt you owe is "100 million bazillion dollars"; you'd never, ever be able to pay it off.² It's beyond our capacity to fathom that kind of money, and completely laughable to ever consider that anyone would have the capacity to pay.³ By contrast, the second slave indebted to the first owed him "one hundred denarii." One denarii represented a day's wages, so the account they needed to settle was certainly no small one, but 100 days of work was far easier to wrap one's mind around than 150,000 years! So how does the slave not seem to get that the debt he was forgiven far

² Cited by James C. Howell, "Matthew 18:23-35," *Feasting on the Gospels: Matthew*, vol. 2, p103.

³ Lewis Donelson, "Matthew 18:21-35," *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 4*, p71.

exceeded the one he refused to forgive?⁴ His insurmountable debts were forgiven, his family's lives were spared, and his future was preserved; why in the world can't he extend even the smallest measure of forgiveness to the other?

Let's think for a moment — if you've ever carried a debt of any kind — money you owe a friend, your parents, the bank, the IRS; a mistake you made that hurt someone you love; an imbalance of resources in a relationship, be they money or time or expertise or care, that you feel you can never repay — you know the feeling debt gives you. It's a feeling that often grows slowly and silently, *difficult to describe but easy to notice*. You know how financial or emotional debt takes a serious hit on your self-esteem, how it colors every day with a simmering anxiety that threatens to erupt at any moment. The anxiety simmers in your gut, churning and worrying and sickening your days. It seethes in your relationships, fear of what might happen and anger for what already has like a rolling boil that just might bubble over and scald anyone who is near. It feeds in the shadows of your life: always making you feel behind, perpetually keeping you in survival mode, constantly isolating you with shame, forever threatening to overcome you. Debt makes us feel overwhelmingly hopeless, our rhythms and movements of life hemmed in by the equivalent of a 100 million bazillion dollar albatross just refusing to budge an inch

⁴ <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/09/pentecost-15-a-forgiveness-possibility/>

around our necks. What we wouldn't give for some level of control in the face of such powerlessness, some release from the pain it has wreaked in our life!⁵

It reminds me of that old story of the prisoner of war who turned to another and asked, "have you forgiven your captors yet?" "I will never do that," the second one replied. And the response came back clear and true: "Then they still have you in prison, don't they?"⁶

Whatever its form may be, indebtedness — to a person, a system, a bank, a captor, our past, our fear or anger or mistrust or desire for retribution — imprisons us. It controls us and holds power over us. Like the wicked slave whose freedom failed to transform him, *indebtedness* keeps us from the release that *forgiveness* can offer. We can't easily forget the anger and fear and anxiety of debt, and if forgiveness was granted to us — even abundant, lavish forgiveness, a seventy-times-seven, 10,000-talents kind of forgiveness — we struggle to accept it, to let it loose the bonds of the debt and free us from its power.

Will Willimon tells a story about a couple interviewed by a reporter on September 12, 2001. Standing in the wreckage of Ground Zero, they grieved openly that day, their tears for the loss of their darling daughter

⁵ Two fantastic essays about the psychology of debt were helpful in writing this part of the sermon: <http://www.apa.org/gradpsych/2013/01/debt.aspx> and <https://medium.com/personal-growth/the-emotional-burden-of-debt-c0b4ed8dde30>

⁶ As quoted by Charlotte Dudley Cleghorn, "Matthew 18:21-35," *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 4*, p72.

who had died in the attacks. At a loss for words of consolation, the reporter said to them, "well, I know you'll be able to go to your place of worship this weekend, and there you might be able to find some comfort." And with honesty and truth, the mother said this: "No, we won't be going to our place of worship this weekend 'cause we're Christians, and we know what Jesus commands about forgiveness, and frankly, we're just not yet ready for that. It'll be some time before we'll want to be with Jesus."⁷

You and I may not be grieving parents in the aftermath of a terrorist attack, but we surely understand what that mother was saying, just as we find familiarity in that wicked slave. It's part of what makes this teaching of Jesus a tough one. And frankly, it makes me awfully uncomfortable. I hear Peter's question about how much to forgive, the exactness he's after, and I confess my own proclivities towards that line of thinking — wondering how much is required or expected of me so that I can reasonably respond. I hear the first action of the king — the summoning of the slave's wife and children at the reckoning of his accounts and the demand that the family and all their possessions be sold for use by another — and I confess my own distance from such a sale, my skin color bearing privilege from a devastating history of slavery and my economic stability freeing me from the crushing weight of widespread debt, both I neither earned nor deserved. I hear the slave's own anger, waging power

⁷ As told by Will Willimon in a sermon on Matthew 14:22-33, found here: http://day1.org/950-how_you_will_know_if_its_jesus

over another as he reckoned with humiliation instead of wielding forgiveness over another as he responded from humility, and I confess my own urges to demand some sort of emotional payment from those people and situations throughout my life whose forgiveness I don't think I've yet fully granted. I hear the king's angry punishment of the wicked slave for his inability to forgive as he was forgiven, and I confess my fear that wittingly or not, the same reckoning will be had for me.

It's a good thing I'm here each week, because Lord knows I need the lessons my church teaches me. I suppose that's part of why our weekly practice of confession and assurance is so important to me, and I hope to you. Because week in and week out, we speak aloud our confessions. We name places of indebtedness in our individual lives and communal world in need of redemption and reconciliation. We ask God to "forgive us our debts (our trespasses) as we forgive our debtors (those who trespass against us). And no matter our infraction or offense, each week we are reminded that God in Christ forgives us! "Brothers and sisters, you are forgiven," we say! "Your debt has been paid, your fears are released, your accounting to God has been settled." Because we gather in Christian community and practice our faith, we know that our forgiveness of others makes real God's forgiveness of us. We experience together God's grace and mercy, and thus we learn that forgiveness must breed forgiveness, that we can't fully accept or understand the magnitude of God's

forgiveness until we are invited to forgive another.⁸ We learn what Barbara Brown Taylor says, that “the burden is [now] on you, because you have been forgiven yourself, and God expects you to do to others as God has done to you.”⁹ Slowly and quietly, sometimes without even realizing it, our experience with sharing life together in beloved community gives us the space and permission to trade in our indebtedness for forgiveness, our fear and anxiety and desire for retribution for love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Remember those monks in the monastery? Well they pondered the curious words of the rabbi over the days and weeks to come. Who could possibly be the Messiah in their midst? Could it be the abbot? Surely yes, for he was wise beyond words. But perhaps it was Brother John. He was often disagreeable, but always there when you needed help, seeming to appear without ever being asked. Or could it be Thomas, who had such a way tending the garden and caring for the animals. He seemed so life-giving.” And then the most disturbing thought possible occurred, “Surely the rabbi couldn’t have meant me. How could I be the Messiah? But what if it is me? What should I do?”

None of them could solve the rabbi’s riddle, but each in his own way silently vowed to treat the others with reverence and respect since anyone

⁸ Important clarity between those two assessments from Nathan Jennings, “Matthew 18:23-35,” *Feasting on the Gospels: Matthew, vol. 2*, p103.

⁹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Gospel Medicine*, 10.

of them could be the Messiah. A gentle, warm-hearted, loving, concern began to grow among them, which was *difficult to describe, but easy to notice*. As visitors came to the monastery, they found themselves deeply moved by the example of the monks. It simply felt good to be in their presence, and others came to picnic on the grounds, walk in the gardens, or sit quietly in the chapel. It was clear that the rabbi's gift, his assertion that the Messiah was among them, had transformed their hearts and radically changed their behavior. Slowly the monastery once became a place of light and learning, of loving and forgiving, and, as a beloved community, it grew and prospered.¹⁰

Just imagine if our church made up of you and you and you and me could create such a sacred space, a seventy-times-seven, 100 million bazillion kind of church? Perhaps we could call ourselves the Church of Jubilee!

¹⁰ "The Rabbi's Gift," Francis Dorff, O. Praem.