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Sep

Grace

Lessons in Leadership

SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, YEAR A

Concluding our series on leadership, this worship focuses on the transformative power of leading with grace and the ongoing work of reconciliation. We will explore how true grace isn't about avoiding conflict or being overly permissive, but rather acting as a conduit for God's abundant forgiveness while maintaining healthy boundaries. Through communal reflection, confession, and specific rituals of reconciliation, the service will provide a safe space to lament our hurts, extend forgiveness, and discern our next right steps together.

REFERENCES

Exodus 14:19-31

Psalm 114

Romans 14:1-12

Matthew 18:21-35

COLORS

Green

Preaching Notes

Focus text: Exodus 14:19-31, Matthew 18:21-35

I'm sure you'll join me in leaning into the Gospel text this time. It feels like a contrast, like opposites from the Exodus Sea of Reeds experience and the conversation on forgiveness between Peter and Jesus. One seems to advocate a final-solution approach to dealing with oppressors, and

the other rests on mercy—not because it is easy, comfortable, or even preferred, but because it is more like Christ.

You can imagine Peter's exasperation growing throughout this encounter. He comes to Jesus to show that he's been paying attention. He wants another gold star like the one he got a few chapters ago. If anything, he might even have expected Jesus to tell him to slow down because he had gone a bit too far with this forgiveness thing. Standard rabbinic teaching was that one ought to forgive four times to follow the law of mercy. Four times is pretty lenient, most would think.

So, Peter, after hearing Jesus talk about reconciliation and bringing the whole church into the conversation to bring people back into right relationship, swaggers up and says, "I got it now. We should forgive one another seven times." Waiting for Jesus to say, "Whoa, slow down there, Sparky. Four is enough." But Jesus doesn't say that. He doesn't put the brakes on. Instead, he steps on the gas. Seven? Hardly. How about seventy-seven times? Or seventy times seven, depending on how you read the math here. And Jesus would be the first to say that it isn't a math problem anyway. All those sevens aren't about keeping score or tallying up forgiveness, but a way of saying, "Quit counting, just forgive." That should be our default mode. That should be our lead. We start with forgiveness; we lead with grace.

Not very practical, though. Right? A clergy member recounted a conversation with a parishioner after preaching on the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew. The preacher was approached by an angry listener who demanded to know where he got this "woke nonsense." His calm reply was "from Jesus," expecting an immediate apology and acceptance. But instead, the parishioner responded with "Well, that just doesn't work anymore!"

"Blessed are the peacemakers" just doesn't work anymore. "Blessed are the meek" doesn't work anymore. Forgiving seventy-seven times doesn't work anymore. Is that our proclamation? Is that the gospel we will stand for? It doesn't work anymore?

Jesus illustrates his point with a story that verges into the absurd. "There is this slave," says Jesus, "who owed his master ten thousand talents." Wait, what? Ten thousand talents. He owed ten thousand talents. A slave, a servant, a laborer owed ten thousand talents. There is some debate about the value of a talent. Some scholars place it at around twenty years' worth of a day laborer's salary, give or take; twenty years, one talent. So, okay; do the math. This slave owed two hundred thousand years of salary to his master: 200,000 years. This is a nation's gross domestic product-level money we are talking about. How in the world did a slave run up such a debt?

But the real corker in this story is the debtor's comment: "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." How might that happen? That is asking for a whole lot of patience on the part of the debt holder—200,000 years' worth of patience. That is a lot. And then, instead of patience, the master has pity. This word is also translated as compassion, a word often used about Jesus. He had compassion. His heart went out. He had, in other words, empathy. He felt the other's pain. The master in the story knew there was no way his servant could repay such a debt. And rather than holding him accountable for such an outrageous, unimaginable debt, the master simply forgives him. He wipes it away, as if it had never happened, never been accrued – however that might have occurred.

But then, the plot thickens. This man, who was forgiven such an outlandish debt, grabs a fellow worker who owed him a hundred denarii. Now, a hundred denarii is not an insubstantial sum. If a denarius is one day's wage, then this was one hundred days of hard labor. That's significant, until you laid it alongside ten thousand talents. Then it is microscopic, insignificant, nothing in comparison. The servant had been forgiven a debt that would bankrupt nations, so you would think that he would be generous to the person who owed him such a sum. After all, in financial terms, he is now up ten thousand talents. Of course, he should forgive the smaller debt. But he didn't. He prosecutes this person to the fullest extent of the law.

Here's the thing about this story, and remember, it is a story: Jesus is making a point, not reporting the news. But the man who prosecuted the debtor was within the law. It was his right to do what he did. Some might argue that he should have done exactly what he did. After all, how can folks learn that borrowing has consequences? To forgive a debt is to unfairly benefit an individual and ultimately destroy the economic system of the people. Is this parable a commentary on capitalism? No, not really. But it does speak against the idea that commerce comes before humanity, or that systems matter more than people. We are hearing that forgiveness doesn't work anymore. Jesus has a different set of priorities.

But how does the story end? What is the moral that Jesus leaves his hearers with? It is hard not to hear those final verses as a threat. When you read verses 34 and 35, you hear the Sea of Reeds crashing down over the Egyptian army. This is the God who destroys, who punishes. Those who seek divine judgment can find it and wield it like a sword against enemies and oppressors. But look again. This judgment is not about breaking the law. It is about not showing mercy. It is about learning how to forgive. Those who say forgiveness doesn't work anymore need to look at this story again.

There are rabbinical stories that accompany the Exodus passage and cast a different light on the event. Supposedly, while the Hebrew refugees were celebrating their freedom on the far side of the Sea of Reeds, or Red Sea as some translate, God was weeping at the death of the Egyptians. “Are they not my children too?” the grieving God declares.

Jesus came to be the face of God. If the gospel no longer works in our world, then what needs to change is the world. What needs to change is the way we live in community, the values we place on systems over people, the “thoughts and prayers” approach to poverty and circumstance. To lead like Christ is to lead with grace. It is to walk alongside those who are oppressed by debt and by generational poverty, to find solidarity with those who have been marginalized because of race or country of origin, to build community based on shared respect and empowerment. Jesus’ parable declares that we don’t live in a zero-sum game where some have to lose for others to win. Rather, we live in a world of abundance, but with a messed-up delivery system that favors a few over the many. We are called, invited, and encouraged to lead with grace and partner with the Spirit as we build toward the kingdom, the kin-dom, the homespace that Jesus proclaimed.

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