

Have Patience with Me

Text: Matthew 18:21-35

Hymn: "Jerusalem the Golden" (LSB 672)

This morning's parable is a stark and somewhat disturbing story for a lot of people. At the end of it the guy is sitting in jail, and my task today is to see if I can pull off a kind of prison break and find some good news in what we just called the *Gospel* reading. The biggest peril in preaching on this parable lies in making the main message something like, "Don't be like that unmerciful servant!" Were I to make that the theme, I'd in effect be grabbing you by the neck and shaking you and demanding from you that which I can't do myself. And that would enormously ironic, since that's exactly what the servant does when he goes out and chokes his fellow servant and demands that he pay him back—precisely the thing he could not do in relation to his master.

So I'm not going to try to choke anything out of you this morning. Besides, it's foolish advice in a way. Those who do not wish to forgive, they're not going to listen. Whereas those who do wish to forgive and yet really struggle with that in their lives, what happens to them is that they only have their burden intensified by this insistence, this demand, that they must forgive others. So I won't do that.

Another direction I could go is to lay out steps for you, a how-to plan on how to forgive others. But it's not like there's one process, one procedure, for all situations. Personalities are different and you can't run it through a flow chart and—bing!—out comes perfect forgiveness at the end. Forgiving is a hard business, especially when you have something really substantial to forgive. On top of that, forgiveness connotes different things depending on circumstances. For somebody who has been profoundly hurt and damaged, it may be that the best that that person can do is to not go punch the

other person in the face. You may think that's not the finest kind of forgiveness, but not actively seeking revenge is a good start. You do what's in your reach.

Now none of you wants to be that unmerciful servant in the parable. He's not a very attractive person. But I'll let you in on a little secret, and maybe this will take the pressure off a little bit: You already are that servant in the parable. I hope you don't feel insulted, but the truth is there's a little bit of him in all of us. There's some of that unmerciful servant in me. This is why I'm so strongly motivated to figure this out, to figure out where he's coming from and where he's going and try, as it were, to bust him out of the big house before it's all over.

Important to notice is that the action is instigated by, the whole thing starts with the servant being made extremely fearful. It wasn't as though he was in the habit of choking other people before this. But what he did he did because of what happened to him. He was scared silly. His master shook him to the core when he hauled him in and called for an accounting of his debt. He threatened imprisonment and selling all that the servant had. And I think the trauma of that confrontation profoundly altered the servant. He couldn't get over it. When you just barely miss getting hit in a bad car crash, even after the danger is past, it takes a while for your heart to stop racing. The danger is gone, but the adrenaline still has the blood up. Even though the master absolves the servant's debt, that message doesn't really sink in. It doesn't make the impression on the servant as did this startling moment, this fear that consumed him. And that's why I think he goes out and starts choking his fellow servant.

When you first hear the story, you think, How could that guy do that? But it's not mysterious or strange at all. He's tripping out on fear. He's been taken over by this fear

that has been stirred up in him, in spite of the fact that his debt was canceled, which, you see, he doesn't really believe. Exhibit A is the servant himself, who is thrown into jail, where he must stay until his whole debt is paid. But here's the catch: He hasn't got any debt any more! It was all canceled. And yet—and this is one of the delightful twists in the story—he stays there in that prison cell believing that he still owes. His debt, like the walls around him, are in effect all in his head. They are of his own making. But he doesn't go anywhere. Instead he sits there scratching tally marks on the wall.

Now think about him sitting there in the cell. Don't you imagine that every individual ever incarcerated must say to himself once in a while, "Man, what a waste of time this is! What a waste of my life here!" Again, I want to steer clear of saying, "Don't be wasting your time like the unmerciful servant did," because, as I said before, you already are. Or am I the only one among us who has thought about all of the time I've wasted and all the energy I've expended going over past hurts in my mind when I could have been out living my life? Instead I dwell on some injury, not a physical injury, but battles, confrontations I've been in, all those relationship dramas that consume so much time and energy that seem to play back in my head again and again and I rehearse all the dialogue to myself but somehow there's no off switch.

But is that then just wasted time? Time that has been taken away from your life? You would certainly think so, given all the people who tell you, "Hey, stop dwelling on it. Let it go." As if you don't wish that for yourself! As if you don't want to kick it out of your head! So, there's no sense in my saying to you, "Don't be like unmerciful servant," because you already are. Like me, you are in a sense doing time, wasting a part or

portion of your life imprisoned in the walls of your head going over all this stuff instead of just kicking it out and moving on.

So much for all the things I don't want to say. What I do want to say to you is ultimately that it will be okay. I want you to know that heaven can certainly fix things. Even if at the end of the parable things are still a mess, even if things at the end of one's life are still a mess, heaven can fix things. In addition, I would suggest that the time that you think you have wasted in your life will not seem so to you in eternity. After all, what is time to eternity? And to be honest, don't be so sure that it was ever really time wasted. The fact of the matter is that you cannot be what you are not yet. And the bottom line for us is we are not yet resurrected.

Perfect forgiveness resides in your resurrection. The resurrection is not simply a reward; it's the mechanism by which things gets repaired. Once we are resurrected, then everything becomes pure as gold. The catch is you're not yet resurrected. You have the promises, you have baptism, the holy absolution, the blessed Supper, but then the servant had his master's promises, too. Yet he still somehow could not believe them, suggesting to us that it's still possible to doubt. The word of promise is sure but what the ear hears the heart cannot always take hold of. And you remain in the world. And here in the world death rides shotgun beside you and fear hovers over all your thoughts. It takes a long time to throw those two guys out of the car.

So maybe all of the time that seemed at the time like so much wasted time was just the time that it took. The unmerciful servant in any case is no hopeless cause. He's just a work in progress. I think that's where we leave him at the end of the parable. Still in progress. At the beginning, he's reckless, mounting up these enormous debts,

irresponsibly borrowing. Then he gets really scared, shocked, startled and then, being frightened, he becomes ruthless. Finally, he is drawn aside and is given time to reflect. And it may seem torturous to him at first to be forced to sit and think and wait but that is what he prayed for. “Have patience with me.” And patience requires time.

So someday he will emerge. Someday you will emerge from this prison or, to change the metaphor, from this cocoon. There are all sorts of walls. Some walls restrain while others protect. In fact, sometimes the same walls serve both functions. The walls of a cocoon that hold back the butterfly also for a time keep the caterpillar from falling to his doom before he is able to fly. Maybe those things that in our life make us feel trapped—even those cages that we construct for ourselves—serve some good purpose that we don’t completely grasp. And when you emerge, you’ll likely discover it wasn’t wasted time after all; it was what it had to be.

The servant in the parable had no idea how profoundly he spoke when he prayed to his master, “Please just give me time.” Well, his lord gave him time. And of course not all the time in the world would suffice for him to be able to repay his debt. And not all the time in the world or eternity would allow us to repay our Lord for our lives—that supreme gift that we take so for granted. But with time we can learn mercy and become equipped to live a little less recklessly. The servant in the parable asks his master for patience and the master gives him time. So it’s really not a bad answer to his prayer.

One last thing. I know from over the years in talking to people, a lot of people are bothered with or disturbed by their own inability to forgive. They know that they should, they want to, and yet somehow they can’t. Forgiveness does not come by trying really hard. It comes by waiting. And while you wait for heaven’s lights to break through and

for heaven itself and for your resurrection where everything is fixed, here at least is what you can do: As often as you can, draw near to your Lord who desires always to draw near to you and hear him whisper in your ear,

Listen, I am here for you. I am here with you in your prison cell. And you are loved and you are forgiven and you are free. All of the doors are unlocked and wide open. They are just waiting for you to wake up and walk through them when you are ready. And I will wait with you. And until you are ready and even after you are, I want you to know that I gave your life to you and that I won't take it back. And I don't expect you to repay. How could you? And how could I ask that of you?

The gift of life is only any good when it is given freely and fully, no strings attached, no coercion. So what if God were to say to you today, "I give your life wholly to you and I won't ask for it back. It is yours for eternity."

Somebody famous once said the payment for sin is death.¹ Your sin is forgiven. And so death must really be nothing. Death is not a payment for a bill that has come due. It's just an emerging, an emergence from a cocoon. Life then is not a prison, so much as it is a sort of womb. Therefore, there is no such thing as wasted time or a wasted life. Life is just what it needed it to be.

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¹ The famous person was the apostle Paul. "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23).