

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

Vicar Taylor Walker

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Today is a very good day, because today, instead of an ordinary reading from the Gospel of Matthew, we have a parable.

I love parables. They're like presents from thousands of years ago. I love that they're not riddles. They're not questions that have answers. They're more like kaleidoscopes that give us a new way of understanding something that is already in front of us. Parables are opportunities to wonder... opportunities to dwell in the holy uncanny valley... to sit with the peculiar discomfort that comes up when we see how different this world really is from the world God wants for us. And in Matthew, parables love to answer the question, "What is the kingdom of heaven like?"

So, let's check it out. Today our parable is about a fantasy king who wants to settle his accounts. And since this is a king who wants to set things right, who wants to separate right from wrong, then the world of this story must be a world based on law and justice. And that sounds awesome so far.

It says, when the king began the reckoning, someone was brought to him who owed ten thousand talents, which, in our language, would be like saying he owed the king like ten gazillion dollars – just a crazy, ridiculous, enormous amount of debt. And most Bibles use the word 'slave' or 'servant' to describe this debtor, but we're probably talking about tax farmers. Tax farmers are servants of the king

who have been given contracts to collect taxes across the empire – which, incidentally, is how tax collection actually worked in the Roman Empire. So the listeners of this parable would have thought to themselves: ‘oh yes... I know where this is going. Those barbaric Romans and their riches and their laws. The king is totally going to kill that guy.’

And it says that the servant fell on his knees before the king and said, 'have patience with me, and I will repay you.'

And unbelievably... that's not what happens. The king forgives the debt. He does something very honorable. This isn't 'fair,' in the strict sense of the word, but the servant has been forgiven his debt and he can breathe freely and life is good. And then that servant continues on his way, and he runs into another servant, who owes *him* some money – not ten gazillion dollars, but only a hundred denarii, the wages of a hundred days of work.

And so the listeners of this parable, we think to ourselves: 'ah, I know where this is going. This servant is going to forgive as he has been forgiven.'

And... unbelievably... that's not what happens. Instead the first servant grabs the second by the throat and chokes him, saying, "Pay what you owe." And the second servant tries to say, "Have patience with me and I will repay you!" But the first servant doesn't care, and he throws him in prison until the debt can be repaid.

And at this point in the parable, there is a crowd of other servants watching, and they say to themselves, 'that isn't what was supposed to happen. You were supposed to forgive, as you had been forgiven, and you didn't. You should be punished.' So the crowd goes to the king to report everything that has happened.

The king summoned the first servant and said, "You wicked servant, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have mercy on your fellow slave as I had mercy on you?" And enraged, the king handed the servant over to be tortured until he could pay off his entire debt – and that debt is ten

gazillion dollars, impossible to pay, so he will be tortured forever and ever and ever.

The end.

Anyone else have a sour taste in their mouth?

That doesn't feel good. That doesn't feel right. That story started grounded in a world of justice and fairness, and then there was this moment of what seemed like extravagant mercy, when the king forgave an enormous debt that he was rightly owed... but, as the story went on, we see it wasn't *real* mercy after all. It was some broken, twisted version of it – mercy gone rotten.

And in what universe is mercy, *real* mercy, rescinded on account of bad behavior?

Imagine if Jesus Christ forgave you your sins and then said “But don't do it again.

That forgiveness was only good once.”

And it's the same thing here. In this parable we are faced with this horrific story about a debt first forgiven and then unforgiven, about a kindness offered from on high that shrivels up into bloodthirsty, self-satisfied violence.

That is *not* mercy.

It's not often that Matthew's parables tell us what the kingdom of God is *not* like, but that's what's happening here. In telling this parable Jesus is holding up two worlds before us – the world of this story, where justice reigns empty and cold and guided by vengeance. And the world of the kingdom of God, where justice always comes with grace and mercy that flow without ceasing, without condition, forever.

In the parable world, one mistake is all it takes for the king to send you away, forever.

In the kingdom of heaven, there is nothing you could think or say or do that could ever make God love you any less.

Sometimes, when we imagine the work of God, we imagine all the ways God will right wrongs by hurting the people who hurt us, all the ways God will punish the bad people.

But the kingdom of heaven is much more complicated than that, and filled with much more grace.

In Romans it says 'for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God' and yet over and over again throughout the great arc of scripture and Christian thought, God tells us, "You, my beautiful creation. I want you, specifically. I want you again and again and again, no matter what. I forgive you, you are free, you have my grace, you have my mercy, and it will never, ever, be taken from you."

Dear people, I believe that this parable calls us to remember exactly whose kingdom this is and under whose law we live. Not by the forgiveness of a fickle king but by the love of an endlessly merciful God. Saved by grace and freed by mercy, in this life we are called to imperfectly do the work of the kingdom – free to try, free to fail, free to try again. This is the bedrock on which our church stands.

For the gift of mercy we give you thanks, O God. Amen.