

Lent 4

Text: Matthew 18:21-35

*"Reconciliation and Humility"*

Today's church has so much to learn! We have so much to learn about living out the faith we confess in our Lord Jesus. So often we don't get it; we try to live as Christians with the values and by the rules of the world that completely oppose the ways of the Holy Trinity. This presents a great obstacle to us in following Jesus' call for us to be peacemakers in life.

One small consolation comes to us as we read the gospels. There we see that we are not alone. Our spiritual ineptitude was shared by the disciples as well. Tonight's reading from Matthew opened with some of the disciples asking Jesus who was the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Does anyone remember "The Gong Show"? If this question had been asked on that show, it would have merited a great, big "gong"!

Happily though, the question was posed not to a panel of celebrities, but to the World's Greatest Teacher. Jesus called a child to Him, and said to them, *"Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."* Nowhere else in ancient writings do we find an instance where a child was held up as an example to be imitated by adults. Why? Because children are vulnerable, weak, needy and dependent on others for life. Greatness in worldly terms is about independence, strength, and self-sufficiency. It's not that way though, if we would live under God's heavenly rule. Remember the first beatitude? *"Blessed are the poor in spirit; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."* (Matthew 5:3) What better picture of poverty of spirit than a young child?

What a way to begin a teaching that step by step dismantles our worldly assumptions about life! Who's the greatest in God's kingdom? We're asking the wrong question. God's kingdom is not about me and what I want for my life. It's not about what I need to do to be good, successful or great. I am not the center of God's universe. That is the wisdom of this world, but not of those living under God's reign.

God so loved the world that He gave. God's rule focuses on others. The King of the Universe rules His creation with compassion and grace. Nothing in this world can prepare us for this. It is so upside down from what we know with our senses and from our experiences of daily life! But God's kingdom, His way of ruling is real, and it will outlast and eclipse the selfish ways of humanity in this world.

Jesus demonstrated human life under the reign of God as He walked among the people of first century Palestine, and especially as He lived among His disciples. As a man, the Holy Son of God lived like a child. He made Himself vulnerable to attack from jealous Herod, deceptive Satan, self-righteous Pharisees, powerful Sadducees, betraying Judas, and Roman executioners. He was completely dependent on His Divine Heavenly Father for guidance, faithfulness, and courage to walk to the cross for us without faltering. Jesus

humbled Himself like a child to rescue us from the doom and destruction that will finally catch up with this world and those who persist in its ways.

And so must we. *“Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”* Our ways are not God’s. Greatness as we measure it will pass away. Greatness under God’s reign is here to stay, forever. Will we hang on to what deceptively promises us satisfaction in this life, or will we humble ourselves to be Christ’s learners and God’s children, counting those in need among us the greatest and most worthy of our attention?

Reconciliation, the gift of healed relationships with people, is only ours under the reign of God. It began with God giving His Son to rescue us from divine judgment and to set us on good and harmonious terms with Him through His Son’s sacrificial death and resurrection.

As Jesus continued to teach His disciples about the radically different way of life made possible by God’s gracious reign, Peter began to see some of its implications for his relationships with other people. Jesus had just told them that they should count those who sin against them as children in need of their loving correction and care. Peter seems to have realized that the key ingredient to this kind of outreach was forgiveness. *“How can I keep on reaching out to someone who has sinned against me, and is in danger of losing his salvation, unless I can forgive him?”*

Ah, but how much forgiveness would be enough? Forgiveness is hard work! When is it OK, to give up on a person who is going astray? Peter asked, *“Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?”* Jesus responded to the question of His dear disciple with a short, blunt answer and powerful parable.

First, the answer: *“I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.”* In God’s kingdom there is no statute of limitations on forgiveness for those in need.

The parable shows us why. The parable is like a one-act play with three scenes. Scene One: a servant of the king is called to account for his work in the service of his master. His record is terrible. The man has incurred a mass of debt that rivals even national debt of some modern nations. According to a note in the English Standard Bible, “[a] talent was a monetary unit worth about twenty years’ wages for a laborer.” And the slave owes the king that times 10, 000!

The king is rightly disappointed with this slave of his. The penalty for his incompetence is clear. The slave should go to prison and have his family sold into slavery until the debt was paid, which in his case, is never. His debt is unpayable. As the king pronounces the sad sentence on the slave, the wretch falls to his knees before his master and pleads for time: *“Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.”*

Talk about an empty promise! The slave could never make good on it. However, the king was moved by the man's plight, and out of compassion he simply cancelled the slave's debt. Scene One ends with this slave receiving a new lease on life.

Scene Two: Can't you see this forgiven slave leaving the king's palace with a new spring in his step? He is free! Down the street he walks, and he crosses paths with a friend of his, a fellow slave he hadn't seen for a while. Seeing him, he remembers that this man once came to him in a pinch and asked him for a loan. He lent his friend the one hundred denarii – just over three months' wages – that he needed. The memory knots his stomach, tightens his fists, and boils his blood: when is this so-called friend of his going to pay him back? He explodes with anger and strangles the man while demanding repayment. The slave raises his hands to request freedom to speak, and when the angry slave releases him, he drops to his knees and pleads for more time. *"Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything."*

More time? How dare he put off the payment of his debt! He has had lots of time, thought the slave. Now it's jail time. Off to prison the man is sent by his so-called friend.

Scene Three: The king hears about the merciless action of the slave he forgave. Now is his judgment day! Having been fully forgiven by the king, should the slave not have forgiven the one indebted to him? If it's justice he wants, well then justice he shall have. The king reversed his gracious decision and sent the man to prison to suffer for his unpayable debt.

Jesus' parable presses a question upon us: in which scene will we live our lives day by day? Scene Two shows us life when we live it by the standards of this world, and Scene Three alerts us to the judgment that awaits us if we persist in counting ourselves the greatest by refusing to forgive others their sins against us.

Scene One depicts our life under God's reign. Through Christ, God has forgiven us a debt we could never repay, for no other reason than love. We all stand hopelessly indebted to God, and we all stand amazingly forgiven by Him. We are blessed beyond what we can ever deserve. We are blessed to live under God's blessing, being a blessing to others. Oughtn't we, who are so greatly forgiven, be people who constantly forgive those who owe debts because of their sins against us? Has not our King forgiven them? Then who are we to stand in the way of His grace, demanding our own just rights?

Forgiveness is hard for us because though forgiven, we still bear the nature of people turned in on ourselves. It is so easy for us to think and act like the unforgiving slave, counting ourselves greater than them. But only in God's kingdom do we have life. So each day, we humble ourselves as dependent children before Him, and we look constantly to His Son to help us to live in the gracious ways of His kingdom. Amen.