

A Sermon for the Twenty-second Sunday After Trinity, November 12, 2006

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“Does a man harbor anger against another, and yet seek for healing from the Lord? Does he have no mercy toward a man like himself, and yet pray for his own sins?” (Eccles. 28:3-4).

The gospel parable today (Matthew 18:21f.) illustrates the absurdity of one who seeks grace from God but does not dispense grace toward others. The servant owed the king ten thousand talents. The fellow servant owed the servant a hundred denarii. A talent was 6000 denarii. Thus, the debt of the servant was 600,000 times larger than the debt of the fellow servant.

This is the contrast between our sin against God and the relative sin of any other person against us. Our debt to God, which he freely forgives, is big. The debt of any person to us, for which we often insist on complete satisfaction, is puny by comparison. At the altar of God, we accept forgiveness and grace in extravagant quantities. But when we leave the altar we do not always treat our fellow servants with the same extravagance of grace. Why?

The servant in the parable seems to illustrate one reason. Some people aren't really sorry for their sins; they are sorry that they have to face the consequences of their sin. They plead with God for mercy, not because they are aware of their offense against God, but because they want the consequences removed from their lives. When they experience grace, when God removes the consequences, they go back to being the same kind of people they were before. They may even be embittered by the experience of having had to humble themselves.

This seems to be the case with the servant in the gospel. He was sorry that he had the debt. He was not sorry about what he had done to incur the debt.

Many people come to church and turn to God in times of crisis because they are experiencing things they don't like. For a season, they engage in what looks like repentance. But when the crisis passes and the discomfort is alleviated, they disappear. They go back to being the same people they were before—unchanged by grace.

Another reason Christians fail to pass along grace is that they continue to fight the wrong battle. We might call this “Yes, but...” Christianity. Yes, I know I am forgiven, but what about my boss, my spouse and the other people with whom I have conflicts. Such a person mistakes God's grace for God's taking his side in his personal grievances. Religion becomes a tool of attack on others.

Grace does not transform unless it causes us to focus on our role in the problem; unless it leads us to change ourselves rather than insisting that others change. A genuine experience of grace will enable us to give to others because we no longer need satisfaction from them. We have found what we need in Christ.

Another reason people are not gracious is that they see their religion as a meritorious act that leaves them in good stead with God. If we see ourselves as good religious people, we will feel justified in holding accountable those who are not.

Now, we should be concerned about our attitude towards others because the parable has a sharp edge

to it. Jesus tells us that the unforgiving servant was delivered to be tortured until the full amount of the debt was satisfied—no small amount of time on the rack! Then Jesus tells us, “So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother.”

Wait a minute! I believe in a loving God, not a God of judgment. He wouldn't really do that, would he? Well, we pray for it all the time: “Forgive us our trespasses, *as we forgive those who trespass against us*,” which, paraphrased, means, “Do not forgive us unless we forgive others.” And we know that God answers prayer!

The consequence of an unforgiving attitude is so severe because it is an offense against the cross. Jesus suffered all he suffered for the sins of the world. To refuse to forgive is to maintain that there is someone in the world to whom the cross does not apply. This is a demonic suggestion, an offense against the very sacrifice Jesus offered, an offense against love itself.

The only safe-guard against an unforgiving attitude is to live a life of grace. This begins with the liturgy. In the liturgy we confess that we have sinned in thought, word and deed; we come unworthy to gather up the crumbs under God's table. Yet, Christ is always there, always really present to forgive, to fill what is empty in us, to replace our weakness with his power.

In our constant return, in its very repetitiveness, the liturgy emphasizes grace. We continue to come to Christ with our sins—often the same ones as before—but Christ continues to be present, to forgive and heal as we inch along the road to holiness. We will get the point, perhaps, after we have returned for the thousandth time. Here we are as sinners; and there he is as love and grace. If that reality touches the heart just a little bit, we cannot fail to leave the altar and look at the one who has hurt us in a different and more gracious way.

Grace must also be a daily experience. Daily prayer, the daily offices mediate the experience of grace. When we begin the day in the grace of God, mindful of his presence, we are more gracious. And when we process the frustrations, sins and aggravations of the day through prayer, we are brought back to grace. The habitual practice of prayer brings us habitually back to Christ, back to grace. And grace is the antidote for the patterns of pride, anger and retribution that we learn from the world.

The habitual experience of grace trains us to treat others as we have been treated by God; not ignoring the wrong that is done, but confronting it in love; not desiring that any should perish but that all should come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9); dispensing to others the very grace by which we live.