

**Pentecost 15**  
**13/9/2020**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Romans 14:1-12**

**Psalm 114**

**Matthew 18:21-35**

**Forgive until the world is changed**

Sermon preached by Matt Julius

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*God, may my words be loving and true; and may those who listen discern what is not. Amen.*

‘The Sycamore Tree’ is a social enterprise cafe run by the Uniting Church in Heidelberg. While I was helping manage it, I placed on the street front a chalkboard sign reading, “Currently Serving Feminist Coffee.” The coffee in question was a blend called *Todas las Damas*, Spanish for ‘all the ladies.’ It was a blend of coffee from two different locations, which highlight the role of women in coffee cultivation:

One of these locations was the Cauca region of Colombia. Coffee cultivated as part of the Columbian Women’s Coffee Project. Columbia is a country which for decades has been subject to instability: the site of internal political struggles and violence, as well as a lucrative illicit drug trade. The intertwining of violence, politics, and economy has shaped much of the country’s recent history. In the midst of this instability women have taken on a disproportionate role in agricultural work and coffee cultivation; working to support their families after their husbands, fathers, and brothers have fallen victim to the country’s internal violence. The Columbian Women’s Coffee project began in order to establish a network of female coffee growers. The project helps to upskill growers, facilitates the sharing of expertise, and offers micro-financing; and the project works to establish a fair and reliable route to export markets like Australia.

Quite apart from my personal obsession with coffee, the story of the Colombian Women’s Coffee Project is quite instructive. Because it serves to highlight that for many parts of the world — and for large swathes of human history — questions of economics: of debt and forgiveness, cannot be treated simply as abstract metaphors which might serve to teach us simple moral lessons. Rather, issues of economics are connected to concrete concerns for security, and the livelihood of families. The concrete realities of debt and forgiveness are often set within broader contexts of violence and insecurity.

This is helpful to bear in mind when we read in our Gospel reading a parable about a king forgiving the debts of a servant. We are not dealing here with a simple moral lesson, parables never offer us that.

The story of the parable itself is fairly straightforward. A servant owes his king 10,000 talents (a large unit of currency), but the king forgives this debt. We then learn that the servant himself is owed 100 denarii (a much smaller unit of currency), which he refuses to in turn forgive. When this is reported to the king the servant is thrown into prison and tortured.

Commentators are somewhat divided over whether the unrealistic sum of 10,000 talents should be rendered with the sense of a gazillion dollars, or a bajillion. Estimates suggest that 10,000 denarii was equivalent to the entire tax revenue of a country, or administrative region within the Roman Empire. It seems unrealistic that a single servant would have accrued this much debt personally. While it's possible that the unrealistic nature of the debt is part of the point: look how ridiculous and extravagant God's forgiveness is! (Which is undoubtedly true.) Other commentators suggest the possibility that the servant had a responsibility for overseeing the tax collection for the king's territory. The large sum of the debt therefore represents the large responsibility of the servant.

Seen in this light the forgiveness of the servant's debt is not simply about mending a relationship between the king and the servant, or about the servant being given a fresh chance to live up to his duty. Rather, if we explore the text on the basis that the servant was responsible for collecting taxes, then the forgiveness of the king has much deeper implications.

The original threat from the king to sell the servant, and his wife, and his children, and all his possessions, does not serve to merely emphasise the impossibility of the debt — highlighting how vast the sum of debt is, and how ridiculous it is to suggest that the sale of a few slaves, and a few belongings could repay it. Instead the king's threat reflects the cycle of humiliation and violent consequences inherent in ancient (and often not so ancient) systems of political order. To be close to power often means being close to the significant violence used to maintain that power.

In contrast to this reality, the forgiveness of the tax collector's debt does not simply represent a kind gesture, which in any case makes little appreciable difference: whether the king liked it or not such a large outstanding amount was not going to be forthcoming from anyone. The forgiveness of the king disrupts the use of violence as a tool of retribution, revenge, and control. Forgiveness in this parable, in other words, is not simply about letting things go and moving on, returning to business as usual; forgiveness in this parable serves as a starting point for change. Forgiveness has a negative dimension, in the sense that the punishment of the servant is withheld; and at the same time forgiveness comes with a positive and proactive dimension: the kingdom shifts from being governed by violence to being governed by mercy.

When three biblical scholars, Robert Heimbürger, Christopher Hays, and Guillermo Mejía-Castillo, conducted a series of bible studies using this text with survivors of armed conflict in Colombia, it was precisely these themes which came to the fore. The connections between debt and violence in the original historical context seem more readily apparent to people who have had to flee their homes due to threats from illegal loan sharks. In more local experiences, the connection between debt and insecurity are much more immediate when you have found yourself at the end of a pay week with no money left to pay bills, buy groceries, or cover rent.

The insights of the Colombian readers of this text point to the need for forgiveness as a key part of restoring communities. Forgiving the perpetrators of violence after conflict is a necessary part of rebuilding the society that violence ripped apart. Forgiveness needs to move beyond the past, and think creatively about projects which rebuild and offer opportunities for a common future. While the NRSV translation from which we heard earlier renders Peter's initial question about forgiveness — which prompts this parable — in terms of “another member of the church,” more literally the text says, “a brother” (and we might suggest “sister” as well). If forgiveness is part of moving

towards mercy, then we should side with Colombian readers who suggest that references to brothers and sisters must also mean those who are not yet part of our community, those who we are beginning to learn to live with.

If we take this parable seriously we might be led to the realisation that forgiveness is not simply about being nice to another person. But forgiveness reflects a deeper concern for transforming the world to be more merciful and more just.

The lesson the tax collecting servant fails to learn is not just that he should be nice to others, because the king has been nice to him. The servant failed to learn that the forgiveness he had been shown began to break apart the cycle of violence which he himself participated in. Forgiveness began to tear apart the connections between politics and violence, and between financial hardship and insecurity. Forgiveness is the ripple which builds to the overflowing river of God's justice.

Forgiveness does not simply say that, "it's okay, everything will be alright." Forgiveness begins the very process of making things right. Forgiveness is both our individual duty, and our collective call. "We are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice," said the German theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself." This is what forgiveness leads us to.

When Peter asks, "Lord, if my brother or sister sins against me, how often should I forgive?"

Perhaps we are wise to avoid the disagreement over whether Jesus' response means 7 times 7, or 77 times.

Instead we can hear in Jesus' answer: you forgive until the world is changed.  
You forgive until it flows out to your sister and brother from deep within your heart.  
You forgive until there is peace on the earth, and violence ceases.  
You forgive until it melts all anger, and heals all wounds.  
You forgive until all are saved from trial, and rescued from evil.  
You forgive until justice and mercy come.

Hear these words of Christ,  
"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy."

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