

Romans 14:1-12

“Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand. Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God. We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living. Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written, “As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.” So then, each of us will be accountable to God.”

Matthew 18:21-35

“Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. “For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you

everything.’ And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’ Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

Sermon Message for St. Luke’s & Pleasant St. UMC’s
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Pastor Ben Daggett

Forgiveness. Some consider this to be a dirty word. Forgiveness. The mere idea seems unfair, a miscarriage of justice. It’s just plain wrong. Let the other party off the hook? Scot free? Why, they should pay for what they’ve done! I deserve better. I’ll settle the score; pay them back. It’ll cost them big time.

It’s no accident that Jesus’ parable this week deals with accounts and debts, when he speaks of forgiveness. Nor is it a coincidence that our language around fairness and justice, the metaphors we often go to to describe what’s at stake when it comes to forgiveness speak in terms of payment, loss, and retribution. We owe it to ourselves to stand up for what’s right, after all.

It's also no accident that the Kingdom of God's economy, as Jesus describes it, runs contrary to the world's system, as in the parable we just read. As we have explored in recent weeks, much of our cultural experience centers around a zero-sum game, when it comes to questions around fairness and justice. In this system, the winner feels pride and superiority for winning, the loser feels shame and loss of face for losing, and we're all competing over a limited amount of resources, or respect in the eyes of other people, or a sense of safety and well-being. I saw this play out on the highway the other day: you cut me off so I'll cut you off back. In case you are wondering, I saw this as an impartial observer this time, not one of the parties involved in this high-speed, high stakes dance with people's lives. It's a dance of retributive justice: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, and it is deeply ingrained in our culture.

Theologian Walter Wink, in his excellent book *The Powers that Be*, explores the contemporary fascination with payback and retribution in mythological terms, tracing the origins of a story so common to our day and age to Babylonian times, and the myths of Tiamat and Marduk. To summarize very briefly, in this creation story, a male hero god (Marduk) wages battle with a stronger and more dangerous, monstrous female god (Tiamat) who has plotted to kill all of the younger gods for making too much noise and disturbing her and her husband Apsu's sleep. The younger gods learn of this plan, and after the others kill Apsu, Marduk prevails over the stronger god of chaos Tiamat and creates the world out of her remains. Violent order prevails over chaos, and the other gods must acquiesce to Marduk's demands, in keeping with a prior agreement they made before the fighting. The creative act, in this guiding cultural myth, is an act of violence, with a clear winner and a clear loser, and the hero of the story claims devotion and loyalty from all the other players in the story, even though his own ways bring them their own problems and shame as well.

While there is more to it, this rough sketch of an ancient Babylonian myth is what formed the basis of the state and upheld the systems of domination

and oppression that allegiance to the empire required. As a story, this myth spread out over ancient cultures across the earth, and its basic mythic structure was found among the ancient Greek, Roman, Syrian, Phoenician, Egyptian, German, Irish, Indian and Chinese myths. Wink writes: “Typically a male war god residing in the sky--Wotan, Zeus, or Indra, for example--fights a decisive battle with a female divine being, usually depicted as a monster or dragon, residing in the sea or abyss (the feminine element). Having vanquished the original enemy by war and murder, the victor fashions a cosmos from the monster’s corpse. Cosmic order requires the violent suppression of the feminine, and is mirrored in the social order by the subjection of women to men and people to ruler.”¹

This myth, or organizing story to make sense of reality, what Wink calls “the Myth of Redemptive Violence” gained much traction among ancient peoples because of its usefulness for justifying state violence and supporting religious cults as a legitimate and even indispensable part of life among the various empires vying for dominance and control over vast stretches of land and peoples. The empire with the more effective means of vanquishing enemies (through more powerful weapons and more cunning strategy) was the empire that continued to exist, as others fell away, were scattered or destroyed in the perpetual warfare that permeated life in those days.

Wink writes, “[This myth] enshrines the belief that violence saves, that war brings peace, that might makes right. It is one of the oldest continuously repeated stories in the world. The belief that violence ‘saves’ is so successful because it doesn’t seem to be mythic in the least. Violence simply appears to be the nature of things. It’s what works. It seems inevitable, the last and, often, the first resort in conflicts. If a god is what you turn to when all else fails, violence certainly functions as a god. What people overlook, then, is the religious character of violence. It demands from its devotees an absolute obedience-unto-death.”

¹ Walter Wink, *The Powers that Be; Theology for a New Millenium*; Doubleday, New York, 1998, pg 46.

But those were those days.

Not so fast.

Wink goes on to argue, “This Myth of Redemptive Violence is the real myth of the modern world. It, and not Judaism or Christianity or Islam, is the dominant religion in our society today.”²

Wink’s is a fascinating study, as he examines children’s cartoons as the great perpetuator of these ancient stories among us today, and the predominant overarching story of most Hollywood movies and video games. How often do we see a supernaturally strong, “just,” hero-type facing off against a nearly equally-matched foe of evil, chaotic intent, who also possesses powers beyond the everyday? The hero perseveres against great odds, nearly loses to the villain, but by some twist of fate or stroke of genius, or a can of spinach (in Popeye’s case) the hero finally turns the story around and we all breathe a sigh of relief that order and goodness have prevailed over evil and tyranny, and we can move on with our lives in “peaceful” and “ordered existence.” Neither the hero nor the villain learns anything from these epic battles, (wouldn’t Popeye at least open the can of spinach before he faced off against Bluto the next time? No.) and the same story repeats in the next episode, or sequel, or chapter, or installment. Or we are treated to a remake. This story is repeatedly played out in sporting events, “...in nationalism, in militarism, in foreign policy...” and in any number of the other arenas of public life. “What appears so innocuous in cartoons is, in fact, the mythic underpinnings of our violent society,” writes Wink. “No other religious system has ever remotely rivaled the myth of redemptive violence in its ability to catechize its young so totally.”³ “Estimates vary widely, but the average child is reported to log roughly 36,000 hours of television by age eighteen, viewing

² *Ibid*, pg 42.

³ *Ibid*, pg 54

some 15,000 murders.” Wink was writing in 1998, before the advent of the ever-pervasive screens.

And we see this myth in politics: “Put your trust in candidate x, y, or z to save you from impending doom and chaos, and he or she will bring about a return to the order and peace you knew before.” or “I’ll protect you from the villainy and horrendous mismanagement of... [insert other candidate’s name].” In this schema, all other stories are subservient to the myth of redemptive violence, and God’s name, Christ Jesus’ name is employed in vain to offer a mask of legitimacy to garner votes from a citizenry already awash in the chaos of perpetual strife and division. Before you think I’m calling out a particular party or candidate, let a moment’s reflection remind you of how both sides of the aisle employ these strategies. With so much socialization around settling conflict in violent ways, from our youngest days, is it any wonder that dialogue and healthy debate in our country have so deteriorated?

Forgiveness? Oh, was this a message about forgiveness? Jesus’ day and age, 1st century Palestine, was engulfed in state-funded, ubiquitous, and perpetual violence. Violence was the ordering reality for the governing authorities of Jesus’ day, and it permeated every aspect of human activity, at least indirectly. And it had done so for centuries. You all remember the story of Cain and Abel, Cain, who kills his righteous younger brother Abel for offering the sacrifice that pleased God? But after Cain has been banished for carrying out the first murder and had his own family, there also is the story of Cain’s son Lamech, who after following in his father’s ways says, in Genesis 4, “I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold.” Violence perpetuates more violence, and curses more curses. And this in one generation to the next. Imagine what that would look like a few more generations down the line.

Isn't it fascinating, then, that Jesus counters Lamech's curses from the Genesis story with a seventy-sevenfold mandate to forgive? Peter believes that he is going above and beyond with his suggestion to forgive seven times, since the rabbis of his day held that faithful Jews must forgive three times. Peter doubles that number and adds another one to round it off to the perfect number seven. Jesus responds by saying, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." In other words, forgive always and perfectly, with your whole heart, as God the Father forgives.

This is impossible, you may say. And it is impossible in human terms, and it makes no sense if violence and retribution are the ordering stories, as they were in Jesus' day and as they are in ours. But this is more than some kind of heavenly-minded, abstract ideal for us to wish for, this is practical and powerful, transformative and wholly/holy disruptive behavior. We explored last week the greatest commandments: to love God with all that we are and love our neighbors as ourselves, and how these practices bring God's unending kindness to bear to expose the violent inclinations of the heart and lead us to repentance. We saw how this way of moving through the world reveals sin in us and draws us ever more fully into God's utter self-emptying goodness and mercy, and frees us to truly delight in the freedom of God's perfect love as expressed in Jesus, the faithful servant of God and humanity. Today's lesson points to how forgiveness disarms the controlling powers that work in our lives, those influences that rob us of our God-imbued identity and enslave us to retributive systems concerned with the "paying off of 'debts.'"

It is telling that the characters in our parable today are servants. A parable is a fictional story told to make a point or reveal a spiritual reality. The word used here in the Greek, as I have learned from author Roy Hession, is bondservant. In the time of the Hebrew Scriptures, what we often call the Old Testament, there were two kinds of servants: the hired servants who received wages and had certain rights and privileges, and the bondservant, who had no rights, but only an obligation to obey the master without

question and without recourse. The Hebrews were not permitted to keep others of their own race as bondservants, only foreigners. In the New Testament, however, the word bondservant once again arises, but in an unexpected way. I'll get to that in a moment.

In our story, this particular bondservant, or slave, has racked up a debt of 10,000 talents. One commentator claims that the amount this slave owed in Jesus' parable is nearly twice the yearly expenditure of an entire kingdom. A caravan of the day carrying the 10,000 talents of gold this servant owed would have stretched in a line five miles long. It is a king's ransom. Forgiven. The slave walks away and is spared a lifetime's imprisonment, seizure of all his goods, and the enslavement of his wife and children. There would be no way for him to work off such a debt, not even in 200,000 years. 100 denari, in turn, the amount he demanded of his fellow slave, and for which he threw him into prison, was something equivalent to around 5 dollars. When his master learned of it, "[I]n anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart." Sobering words.

But haven't you noticed in your experience that unforgiveness only tortures the one who bears the grudge? Retributive violence demands a response in keeping with the original offense, to save face and maintain social standing, and the one bound to that system finds no rest. And since grudges and curses and revenge only beget more of same, there is no end to the downward spiral. But "Jesus," Wink writes, "never succumbed to the perspective of the persecutors by seeking revenge. He totally rejected complicity in violence."

Jesus lived out and presented a way in keeping with the perfect will of the One who truly holds the power in our universe, and (spoiler alert) it isn't Marduk of the Babylonian pantheon. In John 12:49 Jesus says, "For I have not spoken on my own, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a

commandment about what to say and what to speak.” Jesus emptied himself of every stitch of resentment, every inclination to return evil for evil, every impulse to pay in the same coin with which he had been treated. And the word used to describe our Lord is the word bondservant, the servant with no rights, with no recourse, without pay in worldly terms.

The Apostle Paul writes in Philippians 2:3-11 “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. 4 Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. 5 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

6 who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,

7 but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

8 he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

9 Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,

10 so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

11 and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

As we have examined today, the gods of Babylon, the chaotic thrashing of Tiamat and the violence of Marduk still seek to exercise their influence over our lives today, though in different forms and under new guises. But YHWH God is still the breath that hovers over the waters of chaos, is still the One who calms the storm with a word, the One who extends forgiveness with the courage of a warrior. To walk in the humility of this One is to step into victorious life, it's to reclaim your dignity as one created in God's image and refuse the way that only entangles and binds you to perpetual struggle and fear of losing "what's yours," like the servant in the parable who goes after the other (who is also created in God's image) for five dollars. It's not an easy road, and it will mean continual testing to grow in godly character, but Jesus' call is to forgive, seven times 70. Forgive without end, just as God has forgiven you and forgiven me, a king's ransom, as we see in Jesus on the cross, buried, and risen to glory on the third day. Can you imagine if people really lived with radical forgiveness as their guiding story, out of childlike trust in and obedience to our extravagantly grace-filled God? Will you step out of bondage to the violent demands of unforgiveness today, into the freedom of surrender to Christ, and forgive as you have been forgiven?