

Trinity XXII Sermon by Bishop Michael Hawkins

By the Right Reverend Michael W. Hawkins

Bishop of Saskatchewan

Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us. Put up with us, as we put up with one another. Amen.

“You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you besought me; and should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?”

Friends, my task today is simple. In the next ten minutes, I need to attempt to ensure, that none of you has those words spoken to you by the King of heaven in eternal judgment, and that by warning you of the eternal danger of bearing a grudge and choosing not to forgive, I will at least have excused myself and be innocent of your blood.

Unforgiven sin is an intolerable burden. It disfigures our souls and characters. It destroys all possibility of community. It weighs us down, and it robs life of joy. It steals peace from our minds, and it

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enslaves and imprisons and cripples us, spiritually and morally and often physically, as well. Both being unforgiven and unforgiving are full of torment. They are a taste of hell and a feel of its unquenchable flame. For hell is the place of no forgiveness, where there is no love to cover any sin.

Peter asked Jesus, “How often shall I be forgiven?” Well, no, he asked, “How often shall I forgive?” But we learn that the questions are the same, and the limit on one is the limit on the other. James warns, in James 2.13: “For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy.” And in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus so clearly teaches and warns, in Matthew 6.15, “But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

But the strongest expression and the sternest warning in this matter, comes in the parable Jesus puts before us today. In that

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parable, there are three things beyond reckoning. And there is, in the three-stage argument of that parable, a clear and compelling logic.

Ten thousand talents is an astronomical figure. No labourer could earn that kind of money in a hundred thousand years! So the first thing Jesus does, is bring before us the size of our own debt. Either he is exaggerating our debt, or we are grossly underestimating it. There is here a day of reckoning, an opening of the accounts. And we are told that on that day, we shall be found to have an immense debt before the King of heaven. More than that, we read of this fellow, that he could not pay. We are taught, first, that the debt of human sin is immense, and secondly, that it is simply beyond our repayment. We call that being bankrupt. And the first point of the parable is about human moral bankruptcy before God. We owe a debt which we cannot pay.

Now, note the most interesting and common reaction of the servant. He pleads for mercy but still pretends that he can solve the

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problem himself, saying, “I will pay everything.” So we deceive ourselves into thinking that we can make up for yesterday’s lie by today’s truthfulness, that we can earn God’s forgiveness and our place in heaven. But the message of the parable is the opposite: we are in debt and cannot pay. The first thing beyond reckoning, then, is the universal and personal human debt of sin.

Well, that is the bad news, and I and the Church are often like a good but unwelcome accountant, telling people the real trouble they are in. The good news is about the forgiveness of the King. And the second thing beyond reckoning is his forgiveness. He frees or releases him from that debt, by forgiveness. Now, note here what happens, for we often misunderstand forgiveness. I think that in financial terms, what happens here is that the King writes off this man’s debt. But where does the debt go? The debt is really absorbed, taken on, taken up, by the king. And friends, this is what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. He has absorbed, taken on

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himself the debt of the sin of the whole world, in his cross and passion. The infinite pity and forgiveness of the King is the second thing brought before us. This, then, is the Gospel, which is about the debt of human sin being answered and forgiven by the infinite love of God.

But there is one more thing which must be beyond reckoning, and that is the forgiveness of the forgiven. The two figures in the parable are extreme in their comparison, ten thousand talents and a hundred denarii, like twenty million dollars and twenty bucks. Now in these figures, there are two things going on. First, as we underestimate the debts we owe God, Jesus is telling us that we overestimate the debts owed to us and the offences we suffer. Secondly, we are to see and consider the debts owed to us, in the light and perspective of the debt we owe to God.

Our poor fellow does not know or remember all that he has so freely received, and he will not, by any means, let go of his anger

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and his rights. But there can be no room, and there is no room, in the kingdom of heaven for this unforgiving heart.

So that fellow lands back in jail, and he is no longer free. He is in jail, he is not free, not because he has not been forgiven, but because he will not forgive. You see, the only way to be free, to be released, is to be forgiven and to forgive. Otherwise, you are a slave and a prisoner of the past, shackled by what you have done and by what has been done to you, tormented forever by guilt and grudge. The only way to be free is to be forgiven and to forgive. Then we can walk and live free.

It is this third step which is the key and point of the parable. The forgiving of the forgiven must also be beyond reckoning, freely and generously given in Christ and for Christ. God forgives us not just that we might be forgiven, but that we might also become forgiving. God loves us not just that we might be loved, but that we might become loving. God blesses us not just that we might be

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blessed, but that we might become a blessing. God gives to us not just that we might have, but that we might become giving.

What is before us today is really an issue of stewardship. We are stewards of all God's gifts. That includes our time and money, our health and abilities, and all that he has given us. Your giving, our generous and grateful giving as a church, is necessary to the health and future of this congregation, and to completing the common mission and vision we believe God has given us. As we consider what we will and can and must give in the next year, I lay before all of us that text: "Freely ye have received, freely give."
(Matthew 10.8)

I ask you now to prayerfully consider what God is calling you to give financially, for the work and mission of the Church in the next year. That is one appeal, but the appeal today is even more important and even more vital and necessary to the health and future of our congregation. "Freely ye have received, freely give." That is

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a text to live and to grow by, for it governs our entire Christian mission. And as we grow in our grateful appreciation of all that God has given us, we grow as generous givers. But what we most freely and graciously and generously have received at the hands of God, at the pierced hands of the Son of God, is the forgiveness of sins. And it is that which we are called today to freely give as we have freely received. The Church needs you and me to give if it is to thrive and grow and prosper, and to fulfill the mind and will of Jesus Christ. And it needs you and me to forgive, if it is to grow. You are a steward not only of all that God has given you, but even more of all that God has forgiven you. So I tell you, I plead with you, and I warn you, “Freely ye have received, freely give, for the measure you give will be the measure you get.” Amen.