

Proper 19
Matthew 19

The World of Just Deserts and the World of Grace
By the Rev. Salying Wong

Forgive from the heart?! Well, last week I did. But, today, I'm mad again. I'm in pain again. Was I faking it before? Why didn't it take? Will I be judged because I can't seem to stick the landing? It is so awful to hear the concluding thought of the gospel reading today, "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."

Mercy.

Jesus in Matthew's gospel is a man of hyperbole. It's his favorite device to get a point across. If you take him at face value, it would be a bad news gospel. But if you see that he's actually using exaggeration to free you, then it really is good news. Jesus wants to free us from the World of Just Deserts (also called the kingdoms of this world) to live in the World of Grace (the Kingdom of God). The World of Just Deserts is a world of transaction--not just economically, but in relationships. In this world, there are rules about what is appropriate and inappropriate, and there are consequences and measures for violations. Life is supposed to make sense. Jesus throws all this into question throughout the Gospel of Matthew, but most especially in the Sermon on the Mount. If I were to rename this sermon, I would call it, "So You Think You're Good." In this sermon, Jesus takes to task the rules of the World of Just Deserts. "You have heard do not murder, but I say anyone who is even angry with a brother or sister is liable to be condemned to hell." "You have heard, do not commit adultery. But I say, if your eye even wanders for a moment, you've already committed adultery." In other places, we hear Jesus saying, "If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off." Why is Jesus so out of proportion? It is because he is trying to unveil the ways we try to

tell ourselves that by our own efforts we are good people and, therefore, can feel satisfied. What he knows is that by our own efforts, we can't ever be good enough to free ourselves from our proclivity toward self-deception, hate in our hearts, and violence. The very people he is preaching to will be calling for his crucifixion. "So you think you're good?" Jesus says, "Think again."

It is from the World of Just Deserts that Peter asks the question, "Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother or sister? Seven times." In the World of Just Deserts, seven represents a complete and thorough sense. From the vantage point of the World of Just Deserts, Peter is being very good, very generous.

Jesus answers Peter from the World of Grace, "Not seven Peter, but seventy-seven." And Peter responds, "Well, what the heck is that! How can it be more than the full and complete effort?" And Jesus explains, "Let me tell you what the World of Just Deserts looks like from where I stand in the World of Grace. I'll tell you a parable:

"There was a man, a king, who loaned a slave 10, 000 talents. I know what you're thinking, '10, 000 talents! That's more than 60 million denarii!' The slave could never hope to pay it back. It would take 164K years to earn that much on a slave's wages. But even so, this slave got down on his knees and pleaded with the King, 'Please give me time, and I promise I will pay you back.' Of course, the king knew he couldn't--that he'd never see that money. But he took pity on the slave. Instead of reducing his debt to something realistic, the King cancelled the entire debt! Amazing, right. If we were all so lucky!

"Well, this slave later comes upon another slave who owed him money: 100 denarii. Still, a steep amount--three and a half months of wages. The first slave remembers how he toiled for that money, how he put his family in jeopardy to lend this money, how he trusted this slave because he was his friend--and all the memories made him rageful. So, he grabbed this second slave by the neck and said, 'Give me my money, traitor! You promised!'

“The second slave got down on his knees and begged him, ‘Please give me time. I will repay you.’ The first slave knew this was a lie. He knew how hard it was to save that much money. There was no way. He was never going to see that money. All that work in the fields, those days of privation, all that uncertainty, all the debts he had to avoid paying so that he could lend this to his friend. No, no, no! It was so much suffering and hardship! No. And he gave himself over to the violence of his heart and had this slave thrown into jail, where he would be tortured till he could pay. It was only fair!

“But the king heard about it. The king was a king in the Kingdom of Just Deserts. He saw how egregious the violation was. And he, too, was filled with rage. And said to the slave, ‘Really? I cancelled your entire *enormous* debt and you still want to operate like life is normal. You still think that the rules apply and you applied them to that other slave and condemned him to violence. That’s the world you choose to live in? Well, live in it!’ So, he sent him also to be tortured till he could pay. Needless to say, the slave was tortured for the rest of his miserable life.”

I imagine Jesus saying to Peter, “So, Peter, where are you in the parable? Is a transactional forgiveness enough to protect you from the violence in your heart? Do you think you’re that good?”

This parable offers us two worlds to live in. The World of Just Deserts and the World of Grace. One world always leads to violence because it depends on our goodness--and we’re just not that good. We all hold seeds of violence in our hearts and it will surprise us when it will suddenly take root, sprout, and grow like a weed. It is how we respond to being in pain. And life has pain. One of the ways we manage this pain is to live in a world of consequences--to make sense of it. This happened, then that, then this, then that. If this didn’t happen, then that wouldn’t have happened, and I would be spared, the ones I love would be spared. Life can make sense.

I have scoured my life with analysis, hoping to make sense of incredible pain and betrayal. But, this has not freed me. Rather, it reiterates stories that heighten the pain. "I didn't deserve this! I'm a good person! I did everything right. It was not my fault." If you want to understand the torture that happens in the parable, all you have to do is to run the scenarios over and over again. This is the way it works the World of Just Deserts.

But thanks be to God: there is the World of Grace--where God Reigns. The only ticket for entry into this kingdom: no more explanations. You must surrender all your merit. This is non-transactional forgiveness. Seventy-seven, forever and ever and ever, grace pouring over us like a waterfall.

It takes some practice to get your bearings under the waterfall of grace. The reason we find ourselves forgiving and then not feeling it is done is because living in the World of Grace is a craft. It is a practice. We are well-practiced in the World of Just Deserts. We've grown up with a very important salvation story of fairness. From this vantage point, the World of Grace can even appear to be unjust and unrealistic. I mean, "Are we just going to let people off the hook!" The transactional form of forgiveness demands transformation first and then forgiveness is counted out in measure. But the World of Grace is non-transactional and gives forgiveness the way our plant gives us air. We don't deserve it. We need it. And in the breathing, God breathes us.

The good news for us who have sinned and for those who have sinned against us is that life doesn't have to change in order for us to be free. It doesn't mean that what has happened is good. It is obviously not. But the infection of sin doesn't have to infect our souls. And we don't have to perform the task of release by our own effort. It is God's grace that will help us grieve properly. From the World of Grace we can begin to repair the world we share without extending more pain and violence forward. But the path to the World of Grace is a narrow path. It takes practice and yearning to find the path. That practice is the daily, hourly choice of saying, "Yes" and then surrendering to the mercy of God. But even though it is narrow, it is for you and you can take it. Will you take it, today?