

Sunday September 13th 2020

Intro:

"For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.

Call to Worship

God says: Come to me, You who are debtors. I will forgive your debts and set you free.
 I see your struggle and my heart is full of pity and forgiveness.
 I have absorbed the cost of your debts; my mercy is sufficient for all.
 Come to me, Your time, talents and heart is what I desire.

Prayer of Approach (*When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*; Isaac Watts)

O God, we come offer you something of worth and precious to you.
But what do we have worthy to offer you O Holy God?
What do we, mere mortals, have to offer you O Eternal God?
Were the whole realm of nature, ours;
That would be an offering far too small;
Love so amazing, and a sacrifice so Divine;
Demands, the soul, the whole life, our all.

O Lord, as we worship,
receive our songs, our prayers,
the meditations of our hearts as well as our hearts and minds.
In Jesus name, Amen.

Prayer of Confession (Reprinted by permission from *The Worship Sourcebook*, c. 2004 CRC Publications)

God of all life,
In Jesus Christ you have immersed divine splendour
and wisdom into human life.
He is not repelled by the shadiness and shamefulness of our lives
but seeks to redeem us.
We confess our repulsion from those whose actions bewilder us,
whose sorrow burdens us,
or whose good fortune somehow detracts from our lives.
Our compassion is limited to those like ourselves.
Our kindness is reserved for those kind to us.
Our passionate concern remains silent
until our own little kingdoms are threatened.
O God, forgive us.
Cleanse us of self-centredness and open us to the whole breadth and length,
height and depth of your love, manifest in all of Creation.
Through Christ our Lord, Amen.

Assurance of Pardon from Philippians 2

O God, thank you for forgiving us!

And now empower us, O Holy Spirit, that we may, in all our relationships with one another and with the stranger too, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

Who, being in very nature God; made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant in human likeness. Give us now that same humility and make us servants of forgiveness.

Thanks be to God, we have been forgiven.

Scripture Reading: 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."

Message: Unnatural Forgiveness

My kids like the Avengers movies, you know the films with Iron Man, Black Widow, Black Panther and my personal favourite, the big green beast called The Hulk.

The Hulk is actually a man ... a scientist called Dr. Banner. But as a result of a radioactive experiment that didn't go as planned now when Dr. Banner gets angry he becomes the green monster called the Hulk.

In a way, the Hulk is two identities: one the brilliant scientist, Dr. Bruce Banner who knows everything about everything. The second, the uncontrollable beast called The Hulk who knows about breaking everything.

The reason I like the character so much is because he is so human. They are two identities in the one being. When soft spoken respectable Dr. Banner solves world problems through science ... but when he gets mad, he becomes the Hulk ... and bad guys get smashed and so do lots of other things.

In our passage this morning Peter asks Jesus how often we should forgive one another.

In response, Jesus gives a very unnatural answer. He says not just the perfect amount of seven times but seventy-seven times. Why do I say that Jesus' answer is unnatural? Because human beings are not naturally forgiving. The problems we face as a society ... the real problems we face ... go on for generations ... if not centuries ... in no small part because we cannot naturally forgive. We hold onto anger ... we hold onto status quo ... we hold on to power.

Jesus knows this. He knows that the human heart is not naturally inclined to forgiveness nor is the human heart naturally inclined to remember what it is to be forgiven.

This is why Jesus tells this radically unnatural parable.

Why is so radically unnatural? Simple because it contains the gospel.

Look again at the story. There is a massive debt owed to a king. The debtor asks for more time to pay off the debt. But the king will have none of it. Instead of taking up the offer of extending the debt, the king forgives the debt outright.

Imagine that. Now on the surface we could simply apply this radical story to the world. How much poverty is caused by crushing debt? How many systemic problems in the world are caused by poverty? We don't have to have great imaginations to understand that a lot of racism is perpetuated through class struggle and cold grip of poverty.

The Bible tells us that all debt should be forgiven, not just financial debt but personal debts. If we could make that happen ... unnatural as it is ... I have no doubt that many issues would be alleviated.

But it is so unnatural ... that kind of forgiveness. The human heart and the human economics will never permit it.

This is why Jesus has to tell a story about it. There is probably no historical example of this kind of forgiveness of debts.

Except there is ... In fact quite recently in the United States, the radical unnatural pardoning of debts has been criticized by almost everyone ... even Christians as well.

Yet the debtor in the story told by Jesus is obviously a remorseless debtor who ... in the freedom forgiveness has shown him ... only finds more greed and anger and desire for status quo.

The debtor in the story is a very modern human ... or we are just humans who change very little ... where it counts.

And it doesn't seem to matter about education or upbringing ... everyone wants to be seen as debt free ... but on the inside ... we count our debtors ... sometimes with the vitriol of a radioactive beast.

Now I cannot change the world and neither can you, even if we are able to unnatural in our quest to forgive. But we can make a big difference in the church. We can radically and unnaturally forgive one another and live the freedom that comes with carrying no debts and managing no debtors. And if our communities become places of radical forgiveness then won't they be attractive in a world where naturally we count our debtors?

Maybe the church could be known for something radical ... like forgiveness. And that would be attractive.

The problem is there are Hulks in the church. On the outside they are prim and proper ... well presented and maybe even well respected ... but on the inside they house hauling unforgiveness ...

I have seen Matthew 18 Christians. They love God for the forgiveness that they unconditionally received ... yet are only happy to count out the debts of others.

I probably should be careful here, because I have probably been a Matthew 18 Christian at my worst.

And right now, amid a pandemic and social and cultural unrest ... it is almost impossible to be at our best all the time.

My hope is that we can be like the king in the story. In the story the king is obviously God ... because only God can forgive fully and completely and unnaturally ... or maybe the better word would be supernaturally able to forgive.

My hope is that this divine ability to forgive so fully and completely is hidden in the human soul ... just as we claim through faith to be made in the image of God.

My hope is that in every person lurks a larger than life ability to forgive ... completely and unconditionally ... just as we have been forgiven ... completely and unconditionally.

My hope is that every Christian has enough of the Holy Spirit to be transformed into a great hulking beast of forgiveness ... with a hulking ability to smash debts into oblivion.

My hope is that ... day by day ... more and more debts will be smashed by the power of God's image in each one of us and the church ... not the building ... but the flesh and blood church ... the people of God ... will be recognized by their ability to crush and smash debts ... and the world will be a little more gospel because of it.

I think a lot of people are attracted to the characters in movies who can overcome the evil in the world or the evil in someone else and protect the freedom of the world.

But I think the real world could use some real-life superheroes who ... feeling the of the supernatural freedom offered in the gospel of the King of grace ... can slowly but surely transform the debts of the world into opportunities to set people free ... from debt ... from punishment ... and from crushing systems of ongoing condemnation ...

May we hold onto the truth that our debts are not just put off but are crushed by hulking grip of grace. God bless you all, children of God.

Offertory Prayer (Reprinted by permission from *The Worship Sourcebook, c. 2004 CRC Publications*)

Blessed are you, God of all Creation;
through your Goodness we have these gifts to share.
Accept and use our offerings for your glory
and for the service of your kingdom.
Blessed are You, forever and ever.

Prayers of the People (Reprinted by permission from *The Worship Sourcebook, c. 2004 CRC Publications*)

Tender and Compassionate God,
We thank you for inviting all your children into your kingdom.
O King, let us see one another with your eyes of mercy and forgiveness.
Too often we are afraid to examine ways in which we fall short of your kingdom purpose
For our lives as individuals and as a community,
To accept without reservation, all the debtors of the world.

We thank you that you are always merciful and quick to forgive the Church,
And we pray that in our current climate we will be witnesses to forgiveness and unity.

We pray for the end of cycles of violence; those driven by class and race, politics and economics. We pray that all people will be able to forgive, for we sense that anger and protest can only bring us, so far. We pray for servants of forgiveness to rise and lead.

We pray for those who are ill, bring healing.
We pray for those who are grieving, bring peace.
We pray for those who are dying, bring consolation, hope and assurance.

We pray for those who are struggling financially, or whose businesses are struggling;
We pray for new markets to open safely, we pray for community and government support,

We pray for neighbours to help neighbours.

We pray for those who are lonely.

We pray for children who cannot see their friends.

We pray for the elderly, those with compromised immune systems and everyone who feels alone and isolated through the pandemic; bring words and messages of hope and connection.

We pray for governments and leaders who can help us and can make a difference in all our communities. Give us hearts and minds to focus on all the things we can be grateful for each day and help us to support one another and those in leadership.

O God hear our prayers as we offer them through the name of Christ Jesus, who gave us these words to pray together:

Our Father, who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done on earth,
as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil:
For thine is the kingdom,
and the power, and the glory,
forever. Amen

Closing Hymn: *And Can it be that I Should Gain?*

And can it be that I should gain An interest in the Savior's blood?
Died He for me, who caused His pain— For me, who Him to death pursued?
Amazing love! How can it be, That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?
Amazing love! How can it be, That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

'Tis mystery all: th'Immortal dies: Who can explore His strange design?
In vain the firstborn seraph tries To sound the depths of love divine.
'Tis mercy all! Let earth adore, Let angel minds inquire no more.
'Tis mercy all! Let earth adore; Let angel minds inquire no more.

He left His Father's throne above So free, so infinite His grace—
Emptied Himself of all but love, And bled for Adam's helpless race:
'Tis mercy all, immense and free, For O my God, it found out me!
'Tis mercy all, immense and free, For O my God, it found out me!

Long my imprisoned spirit lay, Fast bound in sin and nature's night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray— I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.
My chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.

Still the small inward voice I hear, That whispers all my sins forgiven;
Still the atoning blood is near, That quenched the wrath of hostile Heaven.
I feel the life His wounds impart; I feel the Savior in my heart.
I feel the life His wounds impart; I feel the Savior in my heart.

No condemnation now I dread; Jesus, and all in Him, is mine;
Alive in Him, my living Head, And clothed in righteousness divine,
Bold I approach th'eternal throne, And claim the crown, through Christ my own.
Bold I approach th'eternal throne, And claim the crown, through Christ my own.

Sending

O God, send us out forgiven as we are,
In order that we might be able to forgive
With the same unconditional nature of your gospel.
But go with us, so that we might receive strength for every encounter.
O Jesus, walk with us with your gospel in our hearts and minds.
O Holy Spirit, bring your strength and counsel to our words and actions.

And now and always, may we bless and honour you, O God.