

“Our Kind of Crowd”

Proper 19

Matthew 18:21-35

William H. Willimon

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In the aftermath of the first Rodney King verdict, in the riots, Reginald Denny was dragged from his truck and viciously beaten by a raging gang. Payback time in L.A. After his painful recovery, he met face-to-face with his attackers, shook hands with them and forgave them. A reporter, commenting on the scene, wrote, “It is said that Mr. Denny is suffering from brain damage.”

Well, there was a businessman who wished to settle up accounts, balance the books, set things in the right. So he called in his servants, among them one who owed “ten thousand talents” which is something like *five tons* of pure silver. We’re talking big money.

Of course, there is no way to pay back such a fortune. Makes you feel real sorry for the little guy. The servant falls upon his knees sniveling something about patience and pity. The businessman has pity and writes off the whole debt.

Yea, sure, like this is the way they teach business at the Fuqua School!

At any rate, this now forgiven servant goes out and happens to meet a fellow servant who owes him a few dollars. And he—remembering how much he has been forgiven, forgives his fellow servant his relatively small debt? Sure, and there’s a tooth fairy and OJ is innocent! Get real. He takes his fellow servant by the throat, hires a lawyer, gets him thrown in jail.

It bothers me a bit that you were on the side of this little sleaze.

At any rate, word gets back to the boss about the way his once forgiven employee has acted. The boss calls him in, “You wicked slave! Look how much I forgave you! Whatever happened to mercy, pity?”

So, of course, the businessman handed the little wretch over to his Mafia enforcer and the torture began.

And Jesus says that the Kingdom of God is somehow mixed up in that.

Well, *we* sure are. Debts must be paid. I, like you, hate to see anybody get away with anything. With whom do you identify in this story? The little servant who at first needs forgiving but, once forgiven, is none too forgiving? Or the king, the big businessman who at first forgives but, once he sees the real wretchedness of the one whom he has forgiven, ends the story with a scene straight from “Pulp Fiction”?

One of the reasons why Jesus tells these stories is because, in stories, we quite naturally apply them to ourselves. Jesus never says, “I’m going to tell you a story about a man who had a couple of sons, but it’s really about you.” He doesn’t have to. We hear the story and we recognize our face.

Dan Via says that these parables of Jesus are like looking through the glass of a window. We look through the window, looking at the world outside. The window is clear, therefore we see through the window to the world.

But then there comes that moment when, looking through the window, we catch a reflection of ourselves in the glass. The parable becomes a mirror. We see ourselves.

Some of you will be like the king in the story—powerful people to whom others

incur great debts. Others of you, despite your efforts, will be relatively powerless and you will incur huge indebtedness to others. And whether in places high or low, there are many debts, and there won't be much mercy or pity. You will note that whether we are talking about the fancy homes where the bosses live on Country Club Way or the more modest row houses of the workers on Seventh Street, high or low, there's not much mercy.

Politicians of the right or the left seem eager to be part of something called "Welfare Reform"—our time to payback all the welfare moms for not realizing the American Dream. And I suppose that you expect me to be merciful to these who are down on their luck, realizing how many breaks I have received—realizing that, though I was not a beneficiary of "Affirmative Action," I did benefit from the "old boy network," not to mention the time and gifts of scores of coaches, teachers, and others who gave me break after break—forget it. This isn't the way the world works. The parable is the way the world works.

I doubt that welfare costs me much more than a few dollars a year in taxes. But the bank doesn't show mercy to me for the thousands I owe on my mortgage, so why should I show mercy to a woman with two children to support?

See? There are parables which show us something about God. But here is a parable in which we see ourselves. There's a great deal of indebtedness up here or down there, and not much mercy.

After the bombing in Oklahoma City, there was a citywide memorial service. Dr. Billy Graham spoke at the service. He began by saying something like, "We are here with you to let the healing begin. We are here to show you that a nation stands beside you in your grief. We are here to forgive."

I thought to myself, listening to Dr. Graham, "I'm not sure that all of us are here to forgive. Janet Reno has not mentioned forgiveness."

Columnist Hal Crowther recently told of a couple of friends who went to a marriage counselor. These quiet people were there enticed into saying too much to one another. Now, their marriage is in a shambles, says Crowther, because they just can't forgive one another for what's been said in the counseling sessions.

Is that why we are so rarely honest with one another? Better be careful what you say to even your very best of friends because, if you say the wrong thing, if you tell too much truth which results in pain, you will pay, and pay. Where forgiveness is in short supply (and isn't it always?), we tiptoe about in our relationships so fearful are we that we will transgress, incur a debt, and then it's over.

Well, perhaps you were thrilled to see OJ walk. I'm sure that you were deeply grieved to watch the brothers Menezes finally go to jail for dusting their mom and dad with a shotgun, and reload. But I was not.

After all, dues must be paid. Morals must be upheld. I have my standards.

It's all over the world, high and low, in the palace with the king, as we noted, and down in the ghetto, debts are being collected. The Palestinian bomber is repaying the Israeli soldier. And the IRA boobytrapper is reciprocating the Protestant extremist. And the guy who held up the convenience store clerk last night in Durham is only compensating his abusing father for twenty years of debts, with interest.

At first, in the story, we thought we had met a merciful king, a forgiving king. But no, by the end, in anger the king is busy extricating the fingernails of the unmerciful servant and we realize that there's no mercy anywhere, high or low, then or now, there

or here.

See? Paul's right. *All* have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). We all want vengeance, even if the Bible says that vengeance belongs only to God.

Leaving a demonstration here on campus, against the death penalty in North Carolina, having made our statement against state sponsored vengeance, against the retribution of the electric chair, someone was telling about a quote she had read in the newspaper, just the day before, quoting one of our politicians in support of the death penalty.

"I'd love to see Jesse Helms fry in hell," someone said. We're not against the chair, just the folk who are in it!

We have met the enemy, the unforgiving, unmerciful servants, and they are us. This is a parable about us. And what's to be done with us, unmerciful as we are? When *all* have sinned and fallen short?

I remind you of the one who told this story, the one who, when we had whipped him, beat him, and nailed him to the wood said, "Father, forgive, they don't know what they're doing."

Our unmercifulness makes His mercifulness shine all the brighter.

My father-in-law was attempting to comfort a grieving family whose son had just died in committing a crime. They were in grief that their son had died; in greater grief at the way he had died, and what people were saying about him.

"Just remember," said Carl Parker, "that when your son is judged, neither I nor anyone else in this town will be making the judgement. The judge will be Christ, the one who is the embodiment of mercy."

I remind you of the one who told this story. He was the one who commanded us to forgive, "not seven times, but seventy-seven times." And who of us has obeyed? All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Yet his glory is that, at last count, he has forgiven us about seventy times seven billion times seven.

I heard of a man who had been on the outs with the church since his adolescence. Finally, after his family had pleaded with him to try church again, he gets up the nerve to wander into an Episcopal church during the middle of the service when the congregation is on its knees praying the Prayer of Confession, saying, "We have done those things which we ought not to have done and we have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and there is no health in us....," and he smiles and says, "Good! Sounds just like my kind of crowd."

Encountering the Text:

Peter, there for the church, there for us, asks, "Lord, how often shall I forgive?" Jesus answers, then he tells a story. At first, the story seems to be about a gracious, very gracious king. The astronomically high sum of ten thousand talents is a bit exaggerated, but nevertheless, it underscores the extravagance of the king's graciousness. At first, the story seems therefore to be about God, the most gracious of kings.

Yet the story takes an ugly turn. When the once gracious king finds out about the servant's ungracious behavior with his fellow servant, the king's grace turns to very ugly vengeance. What do we make of that?

We ought to be careful not to equate the king with God. Jesus does not tell us that this is a story about God. We shall interpret it as a story, not about the graciousness of God, but rather about our shocking ungraciousness. Having been forgiven of our

astronomically high debts by God, we are incredibly ungracious to those who owe us.

Jesus is not only the one who urges forgiveness. Jesus is the one who embodies forgiveness. Jesus forgives.

Sometimes Jesus tells us parables in order to say something to us. Yet at other times Jesus tells us parables in order to *do* something to us, to entrap us in our own deceit, to hold the harsh mirror of truth up to our faces, to give us the grace just for one moment to see ourselves as God sees us. I believe this parable of the Unforgiving Servant or of the Forgiving and Then Unforgiving King lures us into the story and then uses the story to reveal to us our own caughtness in the web of vengeance and retribution and therefore our need for salvation.

A Response to “Our Kind of Crowd”

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I have been very glad to read and ponder Dr. Willimon’s engaging and demanding sermon, “Our Kind of Crowd.” I found myself led in new directions as he helped me see again the wrenching contradiction at the heart of the parabolic text and as he assembled real-life parallels to it that plunge us all into the world of vengeance and forgiveness.

My first response is that Willimon is surely on target as he draws us in to the contradictions that we always find when we go to the problem of forgiveness. I suppose that the contradiction that he finds both in the text and in our many examples is because we are invariably double-minded ourselves about the matter. We know very well out of our Christian nurture as well as out of our practice of civil decency that forgiveness is a proper and healthy thing to undertake. But we find ourselves in the midst of that knowledge in the thick of feelings and inclinations and passions that are not so easily managed or administered and therefore it is surely true that the “good we would do we do not do.” I found his way of articulating the matter compelling and confronting for me.

The second comment I wish to make is about the craftsmanship of the sermon. It ill behooves me to critique the craftsmanship of a sermon by one of the United States’ “best ten,” but Will would want me to do that and will understand that a part of my critique is passed along to him as a practice of envy. For my tastes, the sermon would have been stronger if it stayed closer to the story line of the text and teased that out in much greater detail. As he does it, he almost assumes that we know the detail and nuance of the story because he only alludes to it in passing. I believe that the allusions are not thick enough for most of us to grasp and to make the connections. Thus I believe that he leaves the text too often, too soon to leap to other real-life linkages.

The second reservation I have is about the introduction to the sermon with reference to Rodney King and Reginald Denny. In principle, I think I am increasingly opposed to sermon introductions because they characteristically lead away from the text. What I found with this sermon introduction, albeit brief, is that it led away from the text and stacked the cards so that I was heavily tilted in one particular direction in hearing the sermon. I do not think that the preacher needed to stack the cards but could