

**Holy Trinity Sunningdale**  
**Sunday, August 28, 2022**  
**Readings – Matthew 18:23-35**

Unlike Rev. Jon's sermon on the parable of the master who gave talents to his servants, our reading today is one of the parables Jesus used to explain God's kingdom. And I don't have to do any 'hermeneutical gymnastics' to explain it! Jesus told a story about servant A who said he was sorry and so his master cancelled his debts. But servant A threw servant B into jail because B couldn't pay a much smaller debt he owed servant A. Their master was furious with servant A because of his unforgiving attitude towards his fellow servant.

On the surface, it is a straightforward story about forgiveness with the lesson that just as God has forgiven us, we should forgive others. Only it is never quite so simple and straightforward when it is Jesus and his parables. There are always many layers to the parables of Jesus and to get to the meaning, we need to dig deep.

There are two layers I'd like us to consider today. First, we don't understand forgiveness because we don't understand sin. If I ask us to make a list of sinful acts, it will be easy for each person to fill pages but if I ask us to list our personal sins just for last week, none of the behaviours in our first list will appear! Because, none among those hearing me this morning committed murder, stole, coveted another person's spouse, property or car, gave false witness or worshipped an idol – at least not last week!

In Mark 10:17-21, a rich young man who has kept all the commandments since he was born came to ask Jesus what is missing. Jesus replied him, "One thing you lack, go sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." I wonder how many of us will be very sad if Jesus says the same to us! So, what is forgiveness? I think forgiveness is love and mercy.

When asked for the greatest commandment, Jesus summed up the entire 613 commandments in the Torah as love God and love your neighbour. In this story about forgiveness, Jesus is saying sin is selfishness and breaks the commandment to love your neighbour because our selfishness hurt other people. Forgiveness means love and the love is not sentimental, it is practical because it is mercy in action. At the cross, what we see is God's love and what we receive is God's mercy.

The second layer for consideration is that forgiveness is the determination to move on from the past because compassion is better than bitterness. Psychologists report that patients who are unwilling and unable to forgive themselves cling to guilt which destroy their wellbeing.

In 2006, a priest resigned because she could not bring herself to forgive the criminals who killed her daughter. She explained that she could not preach forgiveness when she didn't feel forgiving towards the murderers. A second priest felt that he had no option, no other choice but to forgive the drunk driver who killed his child because his own life was being consumed by the hatred in his heart. Jesus

in this parable is not just telling us to forgive others, he is saying we need to accept that we are forgiven. In order to be whole, we need to accept wholeness.

During the 1993 famine in Sudan, Kevin Carter, a South African photojournalist, took a photo of a vulture waiting for a starving Sudanese girl to die so it could feast on her. Kevin later won the Pulitzer Prize for this 'amazing' shot and he was celebrated on major news channels and networks worldwide for such an 'exceptional' photographic skill. During one of his interviews, someone phoned in and asked him what happened to the child. Kevin replied, "I didn't wait to find out after this shot as I had a flight to catch..." And the person replied, "I put it to you that there were two vultures on that day; one had a camera." Kevin's constant thought of that statement led to depression and he took his own life!.

Kevin Carter shows us the 2 layers of meaning in our reading today. First, he failed to love his neighbour as himself, he thought about himself alone, he failed to see the starving girl as his neighbour. His photo and the plane he had to catch were his priority and focus instead of compassion for the girl. He could have taken that little girl to the United Nations Feeding Centre where she was attempting to reach. Yes, he would have missed his flight but he might have saved a life! Secondly, he could not forgive himself. He clung to his guilt and it destroyed his wellbeing and led him to commit suicide.

The lessons from today's reading ask us to always remember that we are all sinners in need of forgiveness. But Jesus has no problems with sinners because on the cross he said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Therefore, as forgiven sinners, not only must we forgive others, we must accept that God forgives us when we repent and learn to forgive ourselves too.

What God demands is that we pay constant attention to the realisation of the love of God in human community. In all we do, we are to always think of others and how we can be of benefit to humanity. This is just not about me and God or you and God. Our individual lives have ripples of consequences in God's great design.

I pray that they will be ripples flowing out from the huge impact of God's forgiving love in Christ Jesus. Amen.

**Dolapo Ogunbawo**

**The Vulture and the Little Girl by Kevin Carter**

