

**Sermon title: *Bring forth the kingdom of mercy***

**Matthew 18:21-35**

<sup>21</sup> At that point Peter got up the nerve to ask, “Master, how many times do I forgive a brother or sister who hurts me? Seven?”

<sup>22</sup> Jesus replied, “Seven! Hardly. Try seventy times seven.

<sup>23-25</sup> “The kingdom of God is like a king who decided to square accounts with his servants. As he got under way, one servant was brought before him who had run up a debt of a hundred thousand dollars. He couldn’t pay up, so the king ordered the man, along with his wife, children, and goods, to be auctioned off at the slave market.

<sup>26-27</sup> “The poor wretch threw himself at the king’s feet and begged, ‘Give me a chance and I’ll pay it all back.’ Touched by his plea, the king let him off, erasing the debt.

<sup>28</sup> “The servant was no sooner out of the room when he came upon one of his fellow servants who owed him ten dollars. He seized him by the throat and demanded, ‘Pay up. Now!’

<sup>29-31</sup> “The poor wretch threw himself down and begged, ‘Give me a chance and I’ll pay it all back.’ But he wouldn’t do it. He had him arrested and put in jail until the debt was paid. When the other servants saw this going on, they were outraged and brought a detailed report to the king.

<sup>32-35</sup> “The king summoned the man and said, ‘You evil servant! I forgave your entire debt when you begged me for mercy. Shouldn’t you be compelled to be merciful to your fellow servant who asked for mercy?’ The king was furious and put the screws to the man until he paid back his entire debt. And that’s exactly what our God in heaven is going to do to each one of you who doesn’t forgive unconditionally anyone who asks for mercy.”

So, our parable begins like a scene from a mobster movie, where the boss sends out his henchman to collect. So he called in his servants who were in the red, starting with the one who was deepest in debt, one who owed "ten thousand talents" which is something like five tons of pure silver – more money than anyone would ever be able to pay back in their lifetime. The servant, knowing he will never be able to repay, falls to his knees begging for patience and pity. *It makes you feel pity for this man.* The businessman has pity and, not just giving him more time, but forgiving the debt completely. He doesn't say, "you shouldn't have lived beyond your means", nor does he say, "you should never borrow money from friends of family." He simply forgives the debt. It makes you wonder how someone with business practices like that ever came to have such a huge fortune in the first place.

Still in the haze of the grace and good fortune of what has just happened, this same forgiven servant goes out and just happens to bump into a fellow servant who owes him a few dollars. And he—remembering how much he has just been forgiven – in the warm glow of the grace and love that has just been shown to him – he takes his fellow servant by the throat and demands payment. When this debt cannot be paid, he hires a lawyer and has him thrown into debtor's prison. *At this point, you as the listener are upset for ever feeling pity for this man.*

Eventually, as it always does, word of this gets around and ultimately finds its way back to the boss – how this employee has responded to the great mercy that was shown to him. The boss calls him in, "You evil servant! Look how much I forgave you! Whatever happened to mercy, to compassion?" And then it turns back into that mob scene we were expecting all along, the boss handed the servant over to his Mafia enforcer and the torture began.

*And Jesus, of all things, says that the Kingdom of God is somehow mixed up in that – that this story is has something to tell us about the reign of God here on earth.*

My first year in seminary I was hanging out with an old friend, one I hadn't seen since college, and had one of those eye-opening experiences – not the good kind. Toward the end of our time they said, “you know, you have really changed – you used to have a pretty harsh and judgmental edge, but you have really softened.” It is one of those compliments you would prefer never to get, like when someone you are friends with tells you, “you know, when we first met, I didn't like you...” People don't want to hear that, or at least, I didn't want to hear it because I didn't know that other people saw me as harsh with a judgmental edge – I just thought I was funny and had high standards.

But this friend was correct, I did have an edge of judgment which I have tried hard to release; an edge of expectation of how others should act; an edge of expectation of what I should be getting out of certain relationships or certain communities that I am a part of – an heir of judgment to people I didn't even know. A part of me that still pops up from time to time. And in reading this parable of Jesus this week, I found myself asking, “how did we learn mercy and grace? How did I slowly grow in responding with mercy and grace?” How do we grow as people of mercy and grace? And that is a question I want to put before us this morning, *how do we grow as people who respond in mercy and grace? How do we respond as kingdom people?*

There are two justice efforts that I have been part of on-and-off during my time here in Boise that make nothing but financial sense – two efforts that actually would save us money as tax-payers.

One is 'Housing First', which you might recall me or Rick Skinner or other Homeless Advocates talking about: this concept is simply that the best way to end homelessness is by giving people a place to live – a home and supportive services. Study after study after study has shown this in cities and states across the country: there is no question that it saves us all money to take people off the streets and out of the shelters and put them in stable housing with supportive services. Every city, county, and state that has studied this has come to the same conclusion – housing people will save us money. And despite all of this, in many places like Idaho we lack the collective political will to do so. And you might wonder, what could cause tax-paying citizens to NOT want to save themselves money? To NOT want to save themselves tax dollars?

If you read the comments section on-line, or attend a public meeting, you quickly find out the answer: “because I work for my home. I have earned my home. And we are going to just give a home to someone who hasn't earned it? Who has done nothing? You want to take the tax dollars I pay on my job and give someone a free house who has done nothing.” People will not stand for this. There is openness to 'Housing First' for Veterans, because they have done something in our minds to earn it, but not for anyone else. This is our grateful response to the shelter that we enjoy.

And I have also worked with some of you and others in the community on expanding Medicaid, that at no cost to us as a state we had the opportunity to get health care for 80,000 more people in Idaho – 80,000 people who are stuck in that middle spot where they make too much for assistance but not enough to be able to afford insurance.

And you argue the dollars and the cents. You hear experts say how much this will save; you hear doctors say how much this is needed and how it will improve primary health care

access across the state; you hear people tell story after story of how they have lost loved ones because they could not get the medication or treatment needed. And then, the senators who listen to the testimony, lean into their microphone and say, “that may be true, but I have constituents in my district who pay over \$5,000 a year for their health insurance, so how can I tell that person that we are just going to give health care for free to some other people. That is not fair.” This is our merciful response to the wonderful health care that we have, even if it is quite expensive.

You might be able to argue against these efforts on the basis of a political ideology, or your view on what the government should and should not be involved with, but you can not make the case based on the ways of the kingdom of God.

On the surface this kingdom parable looks like a lesson in the Golden Rule: “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” Forgive as you would want to be forgiven. Or, as this parables seems to put it: Do unto others as you would have God do unto you, because if you do not forgive than God will haul you off and throw you in jail. Frankly, I think that is a terrible reading of the parable. If the only reason to forgive my neighbor is to save my own neck, to secure my own eternal forgiveness, then it is not something I am doing out of love but out of fear. Nor does this interpretation sound consistent with the rest of Jesus’ message – with who the gospels tell us Jesus is. And when our first reading/interpretation of a passage is not consistent with the whole of who the Gospels tell us Jesus is, that means that we need to keep looking further below the surface.

I don't think this parable is to be read with God as the king here, that we should be afraid if we are not being merciful and gracious, because if we are not than we are going to end up with an eternity of unmercy. That is not, I do not think, what Jesus is telling us. *Rather, Jesus is holding a mirror up to us* – pointing out to us what we do to one another, despite what God does for us.

- God has given us this beautiful home –



this Mother Earth which uniquely is able to hold life and provide for it abundantly – a gift freely given to us. And in our overflowing thanks for this gift,



we have created systems of this gift that leave many without any home at all.

- We have been given these beautiful mountains that inspire awe



and provide places of joy and sanctuary, and out of gratefulness for these gifts



we blow the top off of some of these mountains to get at the coal cheaply and efficiently,



so some can increase their profits for the next fiscal quarter and so we can have cheap energy.

- We have been created in the image of God, given these great and fascinating brains with limitless potential for creative activity



And in our gratitude, we have taken those brains and created weapons that can destroy



our home many times over.

- God has given us these amazing rivers which literally carry life, water, which is needed



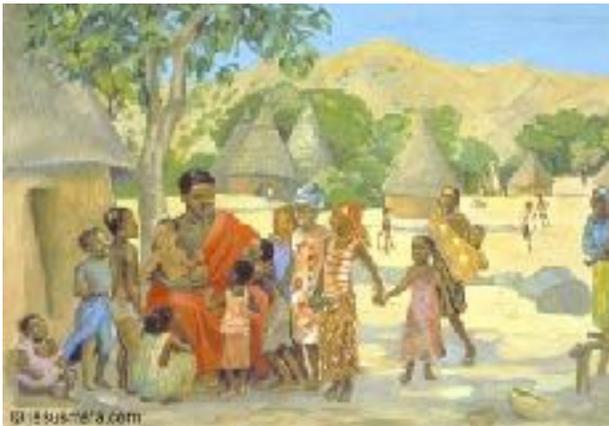
for all life to survive.

and in

our grace-filled response, we have poisoned these rivers in order to make and have more stuff, and to have it as cheaply as possible.



- We have taken the gift of Jesus Christ,



who welcomed children into his presence

and told us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us,



and we have turned this Jesus into a reason for war and hatred and exclusion, killing in his name – all in the name of the Prince of Peace.



- And this great country in which we live, which most of our ancestors came to in search of



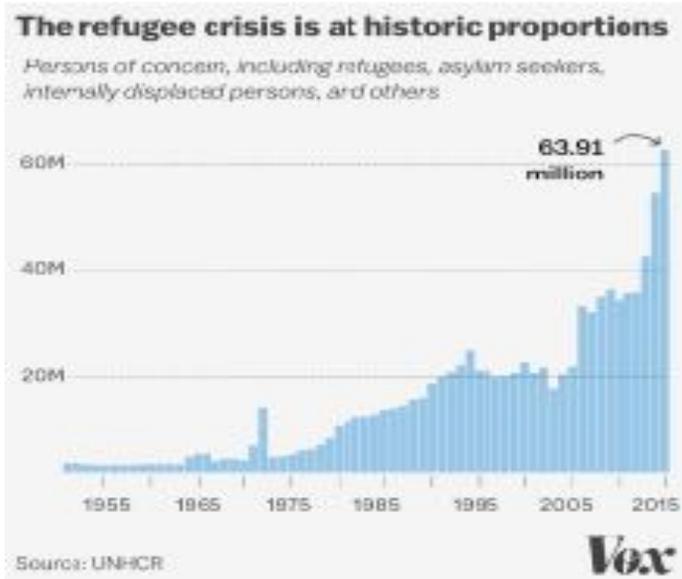
religious

freedom or safety from persecution, or safety, or simply the hope of a new and better future for their children, this place which gave us safety and prosperity, and in our



gratitude,

we have sought to close our borders to those seeking the same opportunity, and to cut the number of refugees who can enter during the greatest refugee crisis we have ever seen.



And despite all of this, God has not given up on us – despite all of this, the God of the universe still works with us and through us and in us and in spite of us – despite all of this, the God of the Cosmos is in love with you, and with me, and the other 7 billion of us. *How can we do this to one another, with the unending love and grace that God has offered to us, how can we respond in this way? That is what the king wants to know.* “I remitted the whole of your debt when you appealed to me,” says the king to the servant. “Were you not bound to show your fellow servant the same grace and mercy that I showed you?” The king who quit keeping score on his servants wants to know why his servants could not do the same thing.

Sometimes Jesus tells us parables in order to say something to us. Other times Jesus tells us parables in order to do something to us, 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 is what Jesus is doing in parable of the *Unforgiving Servant*, revealing to us to us the realities of our own ways of

accounting – showing us in dramatic fashion how we have responded to the unending love and mercy of God. We are to see ourselves in this parable, the ways we still seek an eye-for-an-eye; the ways we still hold a grudge; the ways we benefit from systems that do not forgive those most in need of relief; the ways we still want the justice of retribution.

The accounting books in the kingdom of God have nothing to do with our sense of fairness, the calculators of the kingdom of God do not have keys for what we think we may or may not deserve, the spreadsheets in the kingdom of God do not have a column for what has been earned – the sums only add up to mercy, and the only thing calculated is what is needed: love, kindness, mercy, and enough for all. It is the accounting of a merchant who puts themselves out of business in order to buy just one pearl; the accounting of a king who long ago threw away her ledger.

*Bring forth the kingdom mercy...bring forth the city of God.*

### Sending Blessing

*And now as you go from this place, may the God of unending mercy go with you – opening us to the places where we are still keeping account of debts and wrongs done to us, and teaching us how to better use the calculators built in the kingdom of God – that healing and hope might flow through us and into the world.*

*Go in peace. Amen.*

