

The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – September 13, 2020 – Belonging Matthew 18:21-35 and Romans 14:1-12

In our first lesson this morning, we learn about an enslaved person in a dire predicament. He is already shouldering the dreadful, dual realities of all enslaved people; namely, the humiliating loss of personal autonomy and the perpetual weight of forced labor. Yet, in another sign of the grave injustices in this man's life, he is also said to have incurred financial debt payable to the very person responsible for his enslavement.

If this was all of the information communicated to us, then we would already recognize the great disparity present here. For even more than the chasm between slave and free, this is a scenario in which the designation of one as human chattel draws alongside the narrative of ownership and exploitation of another person as human property. The power differential already laid bare only widens when the identity of the slaveholder is revealed. For he is none other than the king. The commander of the armed forces. The official ruler with the keys to the treasury. He is the legal arbitrator with control, even, over matters of life and death. Yes. Vast is the gulf in title, privilege, and presumed importance of these two men.

Still, however great the distinctions between them, the king is listening intently when the enslaved man promises to repay his supposed debt. And then, in a surprising twist, the most powerful person in the land hears the cry of a slave. Yes. This ruler with no hesitations about securing his own future through the forceful seizure of other's labor is persuaded to act mercifully. And in short order, the king completely relieves the debt of the enslaved person.

I recognize, of course, that the characters in this text are so far removed from our own experience of the world that it is easy for us to think of them as types in an ancient drama. Like countless other stories involving kings and slaves, this one, too, might be relegated to another time in which life was strangely different. But while we may not read this text as historical truth, it is also not merely a strange and foreign tale because it is scripture. And as scripture, it is a recounting of our own origins as descendants of the people of God.

Paul referred to this lineage, not as a biological reality, but as our spiritual adoption by noting that whatever our presumed status in this world, whether male or female, whether Jew or Greek, whether slave or free, our adoption into God's family is the real essence of our belonging. And this means that even in the midst of a very troubling tale from long ago, we are called to find *our* place in this narrative.

Yes. We are meant to rediscover ourselves in the context of this passage, reimagined as the embodiment of the enslaved person. The one for whom the debt has been forgiven. And we are called to reconsider those moments in our own lives when we, too, have been the recipients of unexpected mercy.

The narrative takes another surprising twist when the slave who was recently forgiven his debts becomes the negative archetype of forgiveness. A fellow slave owes a debt to him. And while the burden is far less than the one he was recently forgiven, he seizes his own debtor by the throat and has him hauled away to prison until he is able to repay. Immediately our deeper longing for progress in the slow journey of forgiveness is halted.

With all of this in mind, I invite you now to hear this story from the *New York Times*, published in July of this year. The article states that, “When the nation’s economy ground to a halt this spring, economists warned that an avalanche of evictions was looming. The federal government and many states rushed to ban them temporarily. They placed moratoriums on mortgage foreclosures to relieve financial pressure on landlords.”¹

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/04/us/coronavirus-evictions-renters-immigrants.html>

Yet, “Even in places with ordinances barring evictions,” immigrants often “fear that complaining to the authorities about their landlord could lead to a consequence worse than homelessness: deportation.”² “Immigrant and renter advocates in cities across the country say they are being inundated with complaints about landlords pressuring tenants to pay rent money. They say landlords use harassment, illegal fees for late payments or repairs or simply change the locks as a way to force out vulnerable renters.”³

While these actions rarely rise to the level of modern-day slavery, it is clear that we are now a nation in crisis in which the gulf between those with means and those living in poverty seems particularly unrelenting. Many business owners are closing their shops for good. And millions of employees who had been furloughed in the early stages of the pandemic are learning that they no longer have a steady job waiting for them at the end of the tunnel. All the while, the debts keep piling up, as the people wonder, “how long?”

I would never claim that it is easy to forgive a debt. In reality, doing so goes against our nature. We fear, for entirely legitimate reasons, that if we were to be

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

more merciful toward others, that there might be nothing left for us either in the present or in the future. We struggle daily with where to draw the lines between compassion for our neighbors, and the preservation of life as we know it. No matter our station in life, there are no easy answers here.

But what we find in the biblical narrative is the consistent call to generosity as the hallmark of faithful living. For “we do not live to ourselves.” But rather, “if we live, we live to the Lord... and whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.” Friends, mercy is our sacred calling, our true identity, and our essential belonging as the spiritual ancestors of the people of God. As we gather today at God’s table of mercy and forgiveness, let us remember the debts from which we have been freed. And let us go and do likewise, in the name of the One who redeems us, Jesus Christ our Lord. May it be so and all thanks be to God. Amen.