

## An Outpost of Heaven

As I begin today I want to express my appreciation to Alice Hanson for her helpful sermon last Sunday. Alice helped us to see that in our Scripture readings, we are in the midst of a series of teachings about what it means to be the church. Both in Paul's letter to the Romans, and in the passages from Matthew's gospel, this has been the focus, presented in a variety of different forms.

We've had lists of do's and don'ts, and practical advice about conflict resolution, and in today's readings we have further guidance on how to manage difference in the church in Romans; and a parable in the Gospel reading, giving us an image, painting a picture of what life in the kingdom of heaven of heaven is like, what life in the church ought to be.

All of these ways Scripture uses to train us in the way of Jesus, teaching us how to be the church.

The goal in a way is to make us citizens of a different reality, participants in a different kind of community, a community unlike the kinds of communities we normally participate in. The church is a community that upends, reverses, or sets aside many of the normal rules by which the world works.

The kinds of rules that govern our society, the rules that shape our economy,

the rules that are policed by our justice system, the unspoken rules that govern our personal relationships.

Let's begin with the passage from Romans. You'll notice that Paul is addressing two groups here: one is called *the weak* and the other by implication is *the strong*. Paul is talking about their various dietary practices and religious observances.

A lot of the detail is lost to us, but the important thing to recognize is that Paul is addressing differences in beliefs and practices within the church. Some people believe one way, and their belief leads them to favour certain practices; while others have different beliefs that lead to different practices.

Paul's guidance to them is to not judge one another. To not set themselves up as judges of what is most pleasing to God in terms of practices or ways of believing. This is a common theme in Paul's writing, here and elsewhere: that we are not to make hierarchical distinctions, putting in place our own standards of who is more righteous or holy.

It's not for us to judge; judgement belongs to God. Our job is to love one another across our differences. Paul's best known image for the church is the body of

Christ, with all the various parts integral to the good functioning of the whole. No parts to be despised and rejected by the body; no parts to be exalted or set above and apart from the body.

Paul wants to ensure that we are not setting our own standards or judgements in place of God. In this passage, Paul says whatever you do, do it with reverence, do it in a way that honours God. In the end we all stand before God, accountable to God, and not to rules that one part of the community sets up as a standard. In the meantime, so long as we are each honouring God in our own way, we are not to judge one another.

All together, we are meant to orient our lives towards God. So if you choose to fast, fine: fast in a way that honours God; and if you choose to eat, eat in a way that celebrates God. If you choose to take a sabbath rest from all activity, use that pause to turn toward God; and if your hands are busy with tasks, let your work be an opportunity to give thanks to God. Let your whole life be lived oriented toward God.

This theme of not judging one another, and of not putting our own judgements in place of God, carries over into the gospel reading for today. Here we move into the world of parable, with Jesus giving us an image, a powerful mini-drama, to illustrate his teaching about forgiveness.

You'll recall that last week Alice spoke about the practice of conflict resolution that is described in the passage immediately before our text for today. That was Jesus' teaching about what to do when another member of the church sins

against you. And then today's text follows that up with Peter asking, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?"

If you think about it, seven times is a lot of times to forgive. If you think about a time that someone has wronged you--lied to you, failed to repay a debt, broke a promise, let you down--most of the time, most of us never get to seven: we hit our limit long before then. So this is a stretch for Peter: "As many as *seven* times?"

I imagine Peter hoping Jesus will say, "Not as many as seven; don't be ridiculous! Three's enough." Well if Peter was hoping that, imagine his shock and dismay when he hears the answer, "Not seven times, but . . . seventy-seven times." Seven was a stretch; seventy-seven is impossible. Rather like walking on water or something.

And indeed, the numbers in this parable are not meant to seem *very large*: they are meant to seem *impossible*. The debt of ten thousand talents is equivalent to something like 150,000 years' wages for a labourer! What can be going on here? How on earth can this parable be giving us any practical advice on what it means to be the church?

The clue, I suspect, is in this notion of not trying to think in terms of our own standards and judgments, our human standards and judgments. Not putting those in place as the standards by which we function in the church. The message is that God's standards, God's judgements, are radically different from our human standards and judgments; and that it is

God's standards and judgments that we are meant to live by.

The wicked slave in the parable reminds us of our temptation to keep reverting to our human standards in our dealings with one another, even as we have been recipients of God's standards, beneficiaries of God's amazing grace! God is so gracious to us, and then we revert to treating one another according to our petty, transactional, eye for an eye, rules.

Forgiving someone else seven times seems very steep to us. Some of us here know what it is like. I think especially of those among us who have lived with and loved someone struggling with addiction, or with someone navigating life with fetal alcohol syndrome; or maybe with someone who has less clear drivers of harmful or difficult behaviour.

Maybe you're even at, or near, seventy-seven by now. If that's you, I pray that you and your loved one will know God's presence with you in your struggles.

But if we turn this around and ask ourselves, How many times have we been forgiven by others? How many times have we been forgiven by God? That's what I think Jesus is pointing to in this parable. How many times have we made a mistake, hurt someone, told a lie, failed to repay a debt or to extend the kindness shown to us, broken a promise, let someone down; how many times have we failed and been saved by grace?

I know in my own case it's been a lot more than seventy-seven times. Thanks be to God that I haven't had to pay the price for all my mistakes.

What Paul and Jesus are trying to tell us in these texts for today is that the church is meant to be an outpost of the kingdom of heaven: a community that exists in the world to show the world a better way, something better than a society based on our human notions of what is right and just.

In their book *Resident Aliens*, Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon describe the church as this kind of outpost. They point out that, on our own, we are not capable of the kind of heroic ethical feats that Jesus seems to demand of us, any more than we are capable of walking on water.

But as a church, we are a community called together by a God of infinite mercy and grace, a God who so loves us that he took on frail human flesh and dwelt among us, a God who comes as Spirit among us even now, empowering us as a body to be so much more than we could be on our own.

Hauerwas and Willimon invite us to imagine the church as a place that enables us to do what we could not do as isolated individuals, a place that is a training ground that strengthens our ability to live as Jesus and Paul ask us to live: as people who keep our promises; who strive always to love each other across our differences; who extend a hand to the poor, the outcast, the stranger; who forgive one another an impossible amount of times. This then becomes our witness to the world, showing the world what a difference knowing Jesus is making in our lives.

Personally, I love this vision of the church: it is so much bigger than what we

normally aim for. Normally we aim for something like a warm and friendly community, that teaches us good values and good manners, and encourages us to do some good in the world.

But life is tough, and sometimes rough. Life in this world can be painful, and hard, and heartbreaking, for some people more than others. In those places, warm and friendly and good-mannered isn't going to cut it.

Jesus came into the world as God incarnate, and went directly to those tough and rough places, to the places where life is hard and heartbreaking, to the people who had it the worst. Jesus came down to earth and then kept going down, straight to the bottom; that's where he pitched his tent among us. Jesus went to the lowest of the low, and then invited folks like us--sinners and tax collectors--to join him there, in a new community of grace and mercy and radical justice. A community unlike any the world had ever known. That's how the church was born.

Our opportunity today is to recover this sense of what the church is, an outpost of the kingdom of heaven, a community unlike any other, a place where God's will is done on earth, as in heaven. On our own, it is impossible for us to create such a community.

But the God who so loves us, the God who came down as Jesus and pitched his tent amongst us, and who continues to move amongst us and within us as the Holy Spirit, makes it possible for us to be this kind of community, makes it possible for us, even us, to be the church. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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