

Sermon – Matthew 18:21-35; Genesis 50:15-21
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Grace Lutheran Church
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“The Unjust God”

Friends in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. Although we were dressed in our Sunday best, Sunday mornings did not find my big brother and I on our best behavior. As our parents tried to cajole and corral us into the station wagon so that we could go to worship, we could be depended upon to bicker and fight all the way. Sunday mornings were the perfect time for us to get in one last jab or gibe. After all, we knew that we would soon hear those magic words: “I therefore declare to you the entire forgiveness of all of your sins.” Bam! Things done? No problem! Left undone? The same! Our sin-sullied souls would be spotless soon again. Why not call each other a few more names on the way there? While my brother and I were right to treat God’s grace as entirely dependable, we *may* have missed the point in several ways.
2. So, a parable: There was a man who owed his king 10,000 talents. Which is ludicrous. A single talent was worth roughly twenty years wages. This guy owes the king upwards of ten billion dollars. Billion, with a “b,” This is more than the case of a ne-er-do-well who bet too much on the ponies. It’s even more than could happen to a guy whose spouse got incredibly ill only to get the shaft from their insurance company. Ten billion? Jesus is teaching with hyperbolic hilarity here. But the man, get this, says, “Just give me a bit more time!” To get his hands on that kind of cash? Come on. The jig is up. Except for one thing: the character of the king. He doesn’t make a deal on the man’s

term. Instead, he rips up the paperwork. Done! Free! Forgiven! You'd think a gift like that would change a guy. But as the parable continues, he can't let go of this world's ways. His fellow servant, who owes him like half a year's salary, asks for more time. Why give it to him? Fair is fair, what's his is his, so off to jail. Geez, man. No wonder the king is a bit, umm, peeved when he hears of it. Even when confronted by a grace beyond surprise, the man cannot conceive of a new way of living and being in this world. Debts, even if we've been forgiven, must be repaid. Evil must be punished. Violence must be met with more violence, repaying it seventy-seven times, as Lamech says near the start of the story, all the way back in Genesis chapter four.

3. The world has no shortage of violence and evil. On Friday, we marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of the September 11th terrorist attacks. The attacks did not simply mar the blue skies of that Tuesday morning; they took away the illusion that the world was moving out of the horrors of the twentieth century toward something better. We did, for a time, band together in unity but that has long since been squandered. War continues to be the word of the day, as peoples all keep paying each other back in an endless cycle. For every step forward we seem to take several backwards and sideways. As my seminary professor, Terry Fretheim, once wrote, "Progress in sin and its effects matches the progress in civilization." Which is to say, sin and the evil it produces are no less a problem today than ever. Where, we may well wonder, is God in all of this? Will human ways always rule the day?
4. Joseph's brothers speak to this fear, and with good reason. They did, after all, sell their brother into slavery and tell their dad he was dead. For the record, my brother and I never did this to each other before church! In a long and winding road of family disfunction, Joseph and his brothers are reunited, the younger brother having risen to prominence in Egypt. He saves his family from famine and they're all living happily ever after. Until, that is, their father, Jacob, dies. They begin to worry that Joseph has just been playing nice

until Jacob is gone. They can't imagine that he would treat them differently that they have treated him. Forgiveness, no matter how often we've heard of it, is always surprising when you're the one mired in sin. So, here's the surprise: "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good." See what happens here! Joseph does not tell his brothers that their sin wasn't evil or didn't matter. Neither does he let them hide behind the idea that it was God's will. Their sin is their responsibility alone. But, in the mystery of God's will and work, God takes their sinful strands and weaves them into the fabric of the divine purpose. Or, to mix metaphors, in the words of J.R.R. Tolkien, God has taken what seem and sound like the most triumphant notes of evil's song and "woven [them] into its own solemn pattern." And in the promise of God's refusal to let evil win the day, we can begin to find the grace to forgive one another.

5. Back to our parable. Which, by the way, has a word not just for those of us who act like the unforgiving servant, and, yes, clearly, we should try not to be such hypocritical jerks. Maybe God also wants the rich people of the world to model themselves after the king, because maybe a lot of this world's problems would be improved if the boot of debt were lifted off the backs of the impoverished. There's a word for the second servant, too, a word of promise, reminding the downtrodden that the King of heaven is on their side; they will not be held down forever. But the surprise of it all is that God isn't quite like any of the people in the parable, none of whom can finally escape this world's cycles. God, you see, is absolutely the king who looks at our ridiculous tab and then tears it up! You're free! But when we then go back to being ungrateful hacks, God does not throw us in debtors' prison or threaten us with hell. That would be fair and that would be just, but it's not what God does. No. God simply goes and becomes one of us. Collects our ledgers and takes them to Calvary. "For to this end Christ died and lived again," Paul writes, "so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living." So, you

bunch of sinners, you who were dead: You are forgiven, not seven or seventy-seven times but infinitely. Forgiven, you are alive. Yes, you are off the hook, but you are also alive to the ways of this surprising God who is at loose in the world. You have the power of God and the keys of the Kingdom. You can unbind the debts and overcome the evil in this world, because God already has. So, yes, let's all try not to be like the hypocritical jerk in Jesus' story. But honestly, that's a low bar to clear for the people of God's promise. What might the world look like if we lived the Lord's Prayer, forgiving others as God has forgiven us? And when you mess that up? Well, come back again next week. You may do things and leave others undone, but Jesus isn't done with you yet. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.