

Lectionary readings: O.T. Exodus 14:19-31; Exodus 15: 1b, 2

N.T. Matthew 18: 21-35; Romans 14: 1-12

Themes: Freedom and Forgiveness

Preparing to worship

Find a quiet, warm place. Sing or say Taize chant several times

Bless the Lord my soul and bless God's holy name.

Bless the Lord my soul, who leads me in to life.

Opening prayer

Gracious God, be present with us, your people, separated from each other, but joined in spirit. Free our hearts and minds from concerns and sorrows, to receive your steadfast love and peace. Strengthen us to live this day in service to you and to each other, thankful for your forgiveness and mercy.

Reflection on forgiveness

The Exodus readings focus on the mighty escape of the Israelites from the Egyptians by crossing the Red Sea and their great song of triumph. Freedom from oppression at last – a profoundly significant story for God's people throughout the ages.

Today we look more closely at the story in Matthew's Gospel of the Unforgiving Servant to understand more about forgiveness and mercy. It comes after a passage dealing with unacceptable behaviour by church members toward other members.

Peter asks - 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times? (seven was regarded as a perfect number.)

Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you seventy-seven times. (this quote is a reversal of revenge threat made by Lamech in the OT.) Forgiveness is not just a one off event, but is repeated many times over.

The story or parable that follows is about how things happen in the real world. There are shocks and surprises and exaggeration that make the story intriguing and powerful. The characters should just be seen themselves.

For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents* was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii;* and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe." Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow-slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?" And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister* from your heart.'*

The servant's debt is astronomical. There is no possibility of ever paying the debt incurred perhaps by mismanagement or theft. The punishment is horrific.

It is an extraordinary act of grace for a Gentile ruler to forgive the servant's debt.

The forgiven servant then goes out and aggressively tries to recover a much smaller debt owed to him. He shows no mercy, throwing the debtor into prison when an arrangement for payment could have been made. Word gets back to the ruler. The unforgiving servant now must pay his total debt and is ruined.

The meaning of the parable is clear. Those who have received mercy and forgiveness should be merciful to others. God has shown us forgiveness and mercy and wants us to have the same attitude. Yes, that's right, but not easy. Some situations are impossible, and in other cases justice must be done.

Most of the time, though, in everyday life, with God's help we can be conciliatory, trying to speak honestly and respectfully with the other person, despite our feelings. We may be surprised at the outcomes. At least, if we are forgiving, we do not have to carry anger and bitterness around that is so harmful to our wellbeing.

Paul, in his Epistle to the Romans encourages the established members of the church community that was multi-racial and cultural, not to be judgmental of newer members, but to be welcoming and respectful of their practices carried out according to sincerely held beliefs. The 'strong' are to lead by their example as brothers and sisters in Christ. The following hymn sums things up very well and provides prayerful and helpful insights on forgiveness and mercy.

Tis 648 Help us accept each other

**Help us accept each other as Christ accepted us;
teach us as sister, brother, each person to embrace.
Be present, Lord among us and bring us to believe
are *ourselves* accepted and meant to love and live.**

we

**Teach us, O Lord, your lessons, as in our daily life
we struggle to be human and search for hope and faith.
Teach us to care for people, for all- not just for some,
to love them as we find them or as they may become.**

**Let your acceptance change us, so that we may be moved
in living situations to do the truth in love;
to practice your acceptance until we know by heart
the table *of forgiveness and laughter's healing art.**

**Lord, for today's encounters with all who are in need,
who hunger for acceptance, for righteousness and bread,
we need new eyes for seeing, new hands for holding on:
renew us with your Spirit; Lord, free us, make us one!**

***Table 70x7 Matt 18:21-22**

Prayer time

Take some time now to pray thoughtfully for yourself and others.

A Blessing: Lord, your compassions fail not. Your mercies are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness. Amen. Lamentations 3:22-23

