

I just returned yesterday from a week at Annual Conference, the yearly gathering of clergy and lay delegates from UMC's in our region who meet at the University of Redlands every June. At the 1997 Conference, 20 years ago, I was ordained and became 'probationary member' of our clergy order. At that time, ordination was a 2-step process. So, 3 years later, in 2000, I was ordained an elder in 'full-connection.' (An analogy would be a teacher who first receives a credential and then after 2 years in a classroom, can be offered tenure.)

After my ordination in '97, the Bishop appointed me as the Associate Pastor of the La Jolla UMC, where I'd already spent 3 years as the Director of Youth and Young Adult Ministries. In 2000, when I was ordained an elder in full connection, I was re-appointed to the La Jolla congregation.

There is one more historical piece if what I'm about to share is going to make sense. I graduated from the Claremont School of Theology with a M. Div. degree in 1996. By the time I graduated, I'd accumulated a little over 45K in student loan debt. This year would've been the year I'd have finishing writing monthly checks of \$345 to pay off that debt. (That may not sound like a lot, but my cash salary at that time was about \$21,000 a year. So, \$345 was about 20 percent of my monthly income!)

Anyhow, on the Sunday following my ordination as an elder in full connection, the Lay Leader of the LJUMC called both my wife and I forward to be recognized. The Lay Leader and Pastor presented me this beautiful stole as a gift. But they had one other gift. Jen and I were stunned when they gave us this: a check for \$33K to be used to pay down my student loan debt.

Over the course of the next few weeks, people who had not sent a contribution for this gift did so, and another \$3K or \$4K came in. A few people then realized that I'd need to pay taxes on this gift and so more money came in. All told, instead of \$45K, we'd be responsible for about \$10K...

But then... in September, an envelope came to my mailbox from Greenwich, NY. It was from a man who'd left the La Jolla church a year earlier. The envelope contained a handwritten note that said something like: "I know this is late, and I have no idea how much was raised for your student loan. If there's anything left over from this, I trust you'll know what to do." The check was for \$10K.

Do you think I might relate to the parable we've just heard, of having an overwhelming debt suddenly and completely wiped out?

But what I want to lift up is this: on the Sunday when we received the first check from the church, and during coffee fellowship, many people said things to me like, "You earned it" or "You really deserve it." (Really? I *deserved* this gift?) Or was I just lucky to be serving at the La Jolla UMC, where they had the means to compile such a gift?

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This is our second week in a series of 7 messages on the theme: *Story Formed: Parables of Grace*. Parables are simple stories with deep meanings that are meant to shape and form within us a better understanding of God's ways and what God desires of us.

Before we get into the parable we just heard from Matthew 18, we need to back up a few verses to see what came just before Jesus told this parable. (And we always need to do this because Jesus' parables were addressed to a particular audience in his historical and cultural context. If we don't do this, we risk misunderstanding what Jesus was teaching when he told these parables.)

In Matt. 18:15-18, Jesus says, "*If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or more witnesses. If the member refuses to listen, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.*"

Being a former Probation Officer, this sounds akin to a "3 Strikes and You're Out" scenario. But remember, we began this series looking at the Parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin in Luke 15. And as I said last week, Matthew includes the Parable of the Lost Sheep, which just so happens to come immediately before today's parable. In that parable of the Lost Sheep Jesus illustrated how God loves us so much that He'll do whatever it takes to seek and find what is lost.

So, is it possible that right after telling a parable of grace, Jesus changes the message in the very next verses? As if to say, "Yes, I came to seek and save

the lost... but there is a limit. 3 chances! If you can't get it right after that; tough luck!"

But, what does Jesus say we are to do if someone doesn't mend their ways after 3 chances? He says, *"If the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and tax collector."* At first glance, this seems to be a call to cut off offenders from the fellowship of the body, because 'Gentiles and tax collectors' were the two most despised groups in Jesus' time. Remember, the vast majority of Gentiles in that region were with the Roman occupation, soldiers. And the tax collectors collaborated with the Romans! No good Jew liked Gentiles or tax collectors.

But what did Jesus do with tax collectors and Gentiles? He spent time with them! He ate with them! He healed them, and he offered the forgiveness. So, I wonder about Jesus' tone of voice, if it might've been dripping with irony? Especially given what Jesus says next, in v. 18: *"Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed on heaven."*

In the book, *Parables of Grace*, Robert Capon writes this about v. 18: "If you go around binding your brother's sins on him. If you insist that beyond '3 months and 3,000 miles' his warranty of forgiveness will run out – then the deadly rule of un-forgiveness will be all you have, both here and hereafter. But if you loose his sins, if you move toward your brother in unconditional, unlimited forgiveness, the life-giving rule of grace will prevail, both now on earth, and in heaven."

Which brings us to today's reading. Peter evidently thinks the '3-strikes-and-you're-out' rule a bit harsh, and so he asks Jesus, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Peter is doubling the 3-strikes rule and adds one for good measure! Surely anyone who forgives this many offenses is a person of great grace and mercy!

But hearing the question, Jesus realizes that his irony has been too subtle, because Peter has raised bookkeeping question. So, Jesus clarifies that it's not 3 strikes, or even 7, but 77! And he follows this with a parable about a King who wishes to settle accounts with his slaves. And the first slave he reckons with owes him 10K talents.

Now, 10K talents is an absurd number! One Jewish historian tells us that in 4BC the total amount of

taxes collected in Judea, Samaria, and Galilee (the region we think of as Israel, was 600 talents. 10K talents is probably more money than was in circulation in all of Israel at the time. So 10K talents is an impossibly huge figure. But what happens next is even more absurd. According to v. 26, *"So the slave fell on his knees before him saying, 'Have patience with me and I will pay you everything!'"* But that is impossible! The reality is that the amount is so huge, the slave will be eternally in debt.

But then the impossible does happen! *"Out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave the debt."* Wow!

But this same slave, v. 28 tells us, then came upon a fellow slave who owed him 100 denari, and "seizing him by the throat he said, 'Pay what you owe.'" Suffice to say, 100 denari is a tiny, tiny, tiny fraction of 10K talents. And yet when the fellow slave pleads for mercy, his debtholder refuses to show the same mercy he's been shown by the King to whom he owed an unpayable debt.

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Why is the slave who's been forgiven so much, why is he so unforgiving? I'm going to speculate here, but... I'd suggest the first slave actually thinks he *deserved* the mercy that was shown to him. He believes that he's somehow 'earned' it, as many of the kind people from the LJUMC suggested to me so many years ago when they helped pay off my student loan debt... But I did not deserve it! It was a gift of grace and charity and love far beyond anything I could ever merit. It was their generosity, not my deserving, that wiped the slate clean!

You see, it's not our debts or sins or failures that trip up. None of the errors of our lives will ever be an obstacle to the grace that would raise us to new life. It is only our refusal to see grace as the totally undeserved gift that it is, that gets in our way. Because if we believe we've in any way merited the grace we live, we will start keeping a balance sheet of those who do and do not seem to deserve as much grace as we've been given. When that happens, when we refuse to pass along the grace that has set us free, the grace we ourselves have been given begins to recede and we end up again, in bondage.

When we've been forgiven an impossible debt by our King, there is one – and only one – appropriate response, to reflect such grace towards others! May we learn to do so! Amen.