

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 19
Year A

Corpses in the Corridor

[RCL] Exodus 14:19-31; Psalm 114 or Exodus 15:1b-11, 20-21; Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35

As you heard today's gospel, did it make you uncomfortable, so that you shifted your weight from one foot to another, or perhaps gazed awkwardly into space?

That parable Jesus tells does not pack a dose of sweet comfort but challenges us outrageously in a spot where we are most tender: the trouble we have with forgiveness.

The story has two scenes: first, inside the throne room of a powerful king; second, just outside in a palace corridor. Moreover, the story tells of two worlds: the world as we know it, and the world as God wants it.

The throne room changes in a moment from the world as we know it to the world as God wants it. That palace corridor, however, starts out as the world we know but fails to become the world as God wants it.

The throne room, as I said, starts out as the world we know. It's a world of calculation and control. The boss man is reviewing accounts, and somebody, a slave, owes him big time—really big time. The slave gets called on the carpet, but that's only a formality. No way can this loser pay back what he owes. Might as well sell this guy, his house, his car, his boat, his wife, his kids, and get a couple pennies on the dollar. This guy is ruined. Financially, he's dead as a doornail.

Everybody there in the throne room thinks his appearance is a mere formality. Everybody, that is, except him. Upon hearing the sentence imposed on him by the banker king, this guy drops to his knees, weeps, wails, and writhes around, crying out for mercy. He makes promises he knows he can never keep. What a pathetic sight. And so useless.

This is, after all, a bottom line world. The king's guards are not soldiers in plumed hats, holding lances. No, they are guys in suits holding calculators. The cold steel is in their hearts.

Do you know this world of calculation and control? Have you ever been there, filling in one role or another? Are you there today?

Well, in the story Jesus tells, something unexpected happens. The king drops dead. No, I don't mean literally, right there on the red carpet in front of the throne. But it might as well have been that way. The king drops dead to the world as we know it, that world of calculation and control.

Against the advice his accountants and lawyers would have given him had he bothered to ask them, he goes with his gut and forgives the poor slob his astronomical debt.

To add to the excitement, the poor slob drops dead. Again, I don't mean literally, though it might as well have been. He dies to the world of calculation and control, which a moment before had been like an entire mountain on his chest. He's now living somewhere else. So too is the boss man.

There we are, my friends. If the cross of Christ and the Christian life mean anything, this is what they mean: that to this world, we are dead, and so is God. By forgiving us the sins we cannot make up on our own, God dies to the world of power and control. God's not playing that game. God has taken a one-way trip out of there.

This is a part of Christianity that is scandalous, shocking, and hopeful. It's good news, hot off the presses, for anyone who even suspects that God is the Great Bully in the Sky. Now God has died to all that; God's throne room is not a center for calculation and control.

God is dead to that sort of world, and so are we. We are pulled out from under that mountain which was resting on our chests. We are dead to the world of calculation and control that once held us captive. We are out the door and down the street.

What happens next to the guy in the story? His learning curve is, well, pretty pathetic. He's not even outside the building when he runs into somebody who owes him something. There in the palace corridor, he grabs the fellow by the collar and tries—unsuccessfully—to shake the money out of him.

Welcome back to the world of calculation and control.

This second debtor does his own song and dance pleading for mercy. Is anybody going to die this time? Will there be corpses in the corridor? You'd think it would be a no-brainer for the forgiven debtor to remember that as of a few moments ago, he was dead to the world of calculation and control and that he should act accordingly in dealing with his debtor out there in the corridor. You'd think that mercy received would result in mercy given.

But that doesn't happen. He has a strategically-timed bout of amnesia, forgets he's dead, and acts out the world of calculation and control as though it were his big chance for Broadway. He refuses to show mercy, he fails to help his debtor die to a world of oppression. Instead, he's ready to boot him into the nearest prison for what will be, well, an indefinite stay.

The palace corridor remains stuck. It remains in the world of calculation and control.

Here we get to the heart of why forgiveness is hard. We suffer strategically-timed amnesia. We conveniently forget—or maybe we've never acknowledged—that we are forgiven sinners, debtors who have been let off the hook.

We don't admit that the king has dropped dead, dead to the world of power and control so that we might have another chance, and another, and another.

We don't realize that if faith means anything, it means we're free from this world of control and calculation, dead to it and all it claims, thanks to a king who dies for us.

And so a debtor who crosses our path—even just outside the throne room—will get a taste of calculation and control, and it will be bitter.

Christianity states that forgiveness is necessary. It is not an option, but an imperative. Christianity also makes it clear that forgiveness is hard. It is costly. There is nothing soft and sentimental about it.

The one who forgives dies to the world as we know it in order to usher in the world as God wants it.

This death brings with it a challenge to the one forgiven. That one is then confronted with the imperative of dying to the world as we know it in order to accept forgiveness, an imperative to pass on the gift of forgiveness. By accepting and passing on forgiveness, such a one bears witness to the scandalous truth that, yes, everybody is a sinner, and everybody is forgiven by a mercy that is God-sized.

It's easy to fall prey to strategically-timed amnesia and forget to forgive. That is why Christians gather Sunday by Sunday to celebrate the Eucharist. Here we present time after time, through prayerful word and action, how the king died on a cross, died to the world of calculation and control, died to the world as we know it, in order to set us free from a debt we could never repay.

We gather here in this throne room, and the king drops dead, and we drop dead too. We're out of that world, out of that world of control and calculation that once held us captive.

Then the time comes to leave this throne room and go elsewhere. We meet someone who needs our mercy. Will we die again to the world of calculation and control? Will we die to that world, or will we fall victim to strategically-timed amnesia?

There's the challenge. We can have the ancient pattern of the world as we know it, a life that feels like death. Or we can die to the world as we know it, we can have corpses in the corridor, and await our resurrection.

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