

16Pentecost, Matthew 18:21-35
Rev. Kimberly B. Glenn
September 13, 2026

Gracious and holy Father: Give us wisdom to perceive you, intelligence to understand you, diligence to seek you, and a life to proclaim you. (St. Benedict) Amen.

The gospel text today talks about debt and debtors, debts that are owed and expected to be repaid. Most of us know what it means to owe something. We owe the bank. We owe the credit card company. Maybe we owe somebody for lunch, or someone for dinner. Sometimes we use the word 'owe' in ways that have nothing to do with money. We might say, "I owe you an apology," or maybe "I owe you a phone call or a debt of gratitude." Sometimes we use it in reference to what we feel we are owed, as in "You owe me an explanation."

Isn't interesting how often that little word 'owe' finds its way into our relationships? Have you ever considered how some of the most important debts in our lives never appear on a bank statement or an invoice? We owe one another honesty. We owe one another respect. We owe one another compassion and we owe each other love.

And sometimes—perhaps this is the harder part—we carry around an unspoken accounting of what we believe other people owe **us**. The apology that never came. A kindness that was never returned. A promise that wasn't kept. A wound that was never acknowledged. It's curious, isn't it, that we might think **we** are holding the debt when actually, if we hold it long enough, the debt begins holding us.

That is where Peter's question to Jesus this morning becomes much more than a question about how many times we are supposed to forgive someone. It becomes a

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question about freedom, freedom from the debt. It doesn't matter whether we owe the debt or we are owed the debt, it is ultimately a question about being freed from it.

Peter asks Jesus, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" It sounds like Peter is asking a mathematical question about quantity. It sounds like he is asking, "How many times does God expect me to assuage that member of their sin?" But underneath that question, though, Peter is really asking about the size and the weight of the obligation.

That question prompts Jesus to tell Peter a parable about debt. The characters in the parable are a king and a slave but we know and Peter would have figured out that the parable is really about God and us. We are not slaves, but we are indebted to God for so much. The Israelites were keenly aware of that indebtedness to God, too.

Besides the parable in the gospel text, there is another story in our lectionary today about debt and the possibility of forgiveness of it. Though it doesn't say it quite so explicitly, the story of the Hebrew people's liberation from Egypt is about the debt they owe not to Egypt but to God. In the story, Moses has led the people out of Egypt. They are no longer slaves, but they are in a place where the memory of the comforts they had in slavery was vivid. Moses now had them in a place of freedom, but they had yet to imagine the future that lay before them. Pharaoh's army is chasing them and the sea stood in front of them. Moses trusted, and God opened a way for them.

Aren't there moments in our lives that are like that, moments when God asks us to trust. God does not simply ask us to cope with what binds us, God intends to break

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its power over us. God intends to open a way for us. Israel was not taught how to become more comfortable in Egypt. They were liberated from Egypt. And sometimes our spiritual lives are like that. We discover that God longs to free us from whatever keeps us from becoming fully alive.

Let's consider the Israelites debt in comparison to the first servant in Jesus' parable. That servant owes an unimaginably large debt—ten thousand talents. One talent, just one, is the equivalent of twenty years wages. Ten thousand talents of debt is deliberately absurd. That amount represents many, many lifetimes of wages. Jesus is not acting as a financial advisor. He is creating an image for Peter of a debt that cannot possibly be repaid. There is no satisfying a debt like that. But, in the parable, the king releases it. He doesn't restructure the debt or establish a payment plan. He **releases it**. The servant walks away carrying something he did not own before he came to the king. He walks away in complete freedom from debt.

But then comes the tragedy. A man owes that servant a much smaller, though still meaningful, debt. Instead of passing along the freedom he has just received, he grabs the man by the throat. That contrast could not be more striking. The servant who has been freed reaches in to physically bind the man who owes him something. The man who has been released from debt has not allowed the king's act of releasing his debt to transform his own heart.

The lesson for us is that when we have received grace, if we do not allow it to transform our hearts, we are not completely freed. We remain bound by the debts owed to us. With a transformed heart we will be more able to forgive others, which ultimately

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unbinds us. Forgiving is not saying that the trespass didn't do us harm or that there shouldn't be consequences, and it doesn't always require reconciliation. Forgiveness can begin in just one heart alone. Forgiveness means that you are no longer bound by the obligation, the debt, that you feel is owed to you. The Pharaoh no longer gets to determine the Israelites' future, they do. The person who wounded you no longer gets to block the way to your living an abundant life.

Remember the words we pray when we pray the Lord's prayer. We say, "Lord, forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." And in the older version of that prayer the trespasses are referred to as debts, "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Does that make us uncomfortable? Maybe. It's possible that we haven't forgiven as well as we could. In that prayer we ask God to make us people who receive release ... and then we are to wipe the slate clean for our debtors, we are to *give* release. We ask for that not because our forgiving earns God's forgiveness but because God's freely forgiving us is intended to change the kind of people we are. We, the forgiven, are to become forgivers. We, the liberated, are to become liberators. We, the recipients of mercy, are to become merciful. Out of our deep gratitude we are to become kingdom people and kingdom people reproduce the freedom they themselves have received.

In the Exodus story, God leads people out of bondage. In the Matthew text, God releases debts that cannot possibly be repaid. Think about that for a minute. Think of all that God has given you - this beautiful planet, our very lives, our spouses and our

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children, our four legged friends for heaven's sake. We have been given through grace and God's love for us so very much. Our debt, like the Hebrews 'debt is more than can ever be repaid.

Moses was the liberator through whom God worked in Exodus. Jesus is the liberator through whom God works in the gospels. John's gospel tells us that God so loved the world, so loves *us*, that he gave his only begotten Son. Through Jesus, God entered into our bondage himself. Through Moses, God set the Hebrew people free. Through Christ, God sets us free: free from sin and the impossible debts we accumulate before God. Christ ultimately sets us free from death itself. Christ set us free in order that we might become the people of the kingdom that God longs for us to be.

In every human life, there are debts, there are things that we owe and there are things owed to us. There are wounds that should never have been inflicted, apologies that should have been offered, promises that should have been kept, love that should have been given. Jesus does not tell us those things do not matter, he tells us that they do not have to own us. Because the God who opened a road through the Red Sea is still opening roads, always opening doors and pathways for us.

The God who brought Israel out of bondage is still breaking chains. The God who forgives the impossible debt is still releasing debtors. And the God who so loved the world that he gave his only Son has not come merely to make us slightly better behaved prisoners. He has come to set us free. Free to love. Free to forgive. Free to give. Free to serve. Free to become the people God imagines us to be.

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Perhaps that is what the Kingdom of God looks like: A community of people who know how much they have been forgiven, who know the weight of what they have been liberated from. The Kingdom of God looks like a community of people who, because of the grace they have received, refuse to keep one another in chains.

God sets us free. And then God sends us into the world to set each other free.
Amen.