
How Often Must We Let Go of What Terrifies Us?

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A Sermon by the Very Reverend Sam G. Candler
The Cathedral of St. Philip
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Proper 19A in the Revised Common Lectionary

"Then his master summoned the first slave 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 would pay his entire debt." (Matthew 18:32-34)

Maybe like you ... I am horrified by some of the language in today's gospel!

In anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would 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?

That is just terrible! Terrifying! Why is this parable of our loving Jesus using such vile images as slavery and torture?

A man had a slave who owed him money, Jesus says, as if such a cultural arrangement is perfectly acceptable. And then, the so-called master threw the first slave into prison and torture.

It is one of the outstanding developments of Christianity, and especially of Anglican Christianity, that we condemn the practices of both slavery and torture. They are parts of the old culture, the old empire, the old life.

And, yet, when these particularly hard words""slavery and torture"" occur, year after year, in our scripture lessons, we do not re-translate them. One reason we don't re-translate them is because they serve as a warning. They remind us that even the best people, even the best countries, even the best religions, run the risk of returning to evil patterns. Even good people can backslide, can fall back into thinking that slavery and torture might be necessary and even normal.

But the other reason we keep these words is figurative and symbolic. It is even a spiritual reason.

For, at one level, all of us are slaves. We are all slaves to something, beholden to something. We are even imprisoned and in bondage. I don't mean, of course, that our physical lives belong to some human tyrant or master. I mean, for instance, addictions and habits. I mean obligations and debts. The poor slave in today's parable owed his master money.

But each one of us, here today, also owes something to somebody. Maybe we simply owe money to the bank, for our house or for our car or for our business. Maybe we have an outstanding debt on our credit card bill, month after month. Maybe we carry old student loans. Those are particular, financial debts. We are slaves to that debt, working monthly to pay it off, or, at least, worrying about paying it off.

But each of us also carries emotional debt and psychological obligation, too. We have offended people, sometimes the very people we love the most. We work, emotionally, to pay off our debt. Maybe if we just acted better, we would not worry whenever we run into so-and-so.

We also carry the old psychological pain that others have laid upon us. That old friend betrayed me once, years ago, and I am wary today. Sometimes, in the middle of the night, I wake up afraid, at a loss, that this old friend will betray me again. Or maybe it was my brother or sister, my husband or wife.

We are slaves to so many memories, so many memories of loss and betrayal. Of wrongs done to us, and some wrongs that we have done to others. And, if we are honest about some of those memories, we realize that those issues still torture us. Yes, they torture us. They grind into our hearts. They keep us tied up. They restrain us from enjoying the fullness of life.

So, sadly, slavery and torture are not just physical events of the past. We have renounced those practices in our culture, which is well and good. But many of us still suffer slavery and torture in our emotional lives, our psychological lives, our spiritual lives.

That is one reason why this parable of Jesus is still so important, so critical, today. Jesus offers release. Jesus offers freedom from slavery, and Jesus offers relief from torture.

This release that Jesus offers, is, I believe, at the heart of our Christian religion. It is what distinguishes our practice of religion from so many other practices. It is what makes Christianity authentic and real. Christianity proclaims that Jesus offers freedom and release, freedom and release from what enslaves us. We call that freedom and release, "salvation."

Each of us, every one of us, is that middle character in today's parable. The first slave. We are in need of release of what has bound us. It may not be money. It may be anger and resentment. Whether we deserved it or not, our soul needs to be relieved. And the master hears our travail and sets us free. It is a wonderful moment! A moment of salvation!

But, if we are not careful, it can be a fleeting moment. The middle character in today's parable, the first slave, leaves his master's house and encounters the third character, another slave—maybe a lesser slave—who owes the middle character money. In order for this salvation to truly last, the middle character must, in turn, forgive the debts of this third character. Alas, the first slave cannot forgive the second slave. Because of his unwillingness to pass on the forgiveness, to pass on the release, this first slave is thrown into prison. But, specifically, he throws *himself* into prison.

The graphic description of his suffering is embarrassing and horrible. But those of us who have found ourselves unable to forgive in life, know that this description can be fairly accurate.

The inability to forgive another person is to suffer torture ourselves. The inability to forgive another person is to be a slave to sin ourselves. The inability to release the pain of the past, is to enslave ourselves to the past, forever.

As almost every American knows, today, September 11, 2011, is the tenth anniversary of one of most evil attacks in history upon the United States of America. Almost everyone over a certain age, can remember where we were on that bewildering and confusing and absolutely horrible and despicable morning.

We have spent ten years, and we have spent the last week in particular, analyzing that event and reviewing our responses to that event. Some of the analysis and response has been helpful; some has probably not been helpful. At a foundational level, my own analysis is quite simple. On that morning, the United States of America was ambushed by evil. I do not mean that any particular country, or any particular people, and certainly no particular religion, can be labeled "evil," once and for all. But I do mean that evil can be manifest by most any person, and most any country, and most any religion. None of us is immune from evil. And no one of us is immune from sin.

Our parable today (which is the assigned lectionary for this day) reminds us that even good people can find ourselves enslaving and torturing others. But this parable of Jesus, one of the most important ones in the New Testament, also teaches us something powerful about Christianity.

The Christian faith is about forgiveness. It is about freedom and release. It is about letting go.

Sadly, evil does exist in this world. Unfortunately, evil exists in this world. Slavery and sin exist in this world. It can be horrible and vile.

The way of Jesus, however, overcomes evil and sin, by one distinctive method. The way of Jesus refuses to pass on that evil and sin and slavery to the next person. The way of Jesus refuses to pass on that evil and sin and slavery to the next generation, or the next country, or the next religion.

We all find ourselves at some level of slavery to debt and bondage to sin. Like the first slave in today's parable, we owe things to some masters, and we are owed things by other slaves. We are all at some middle level, some in-between level, between what we owe and what is owed us.

It can be an utterly vicious cycle, an utterly evil cycle.

The one way out, the one way forward, the one way of salvation, is to pass on the forgiveness and release that have from God, to the next person. The way of salvation is to pass it on.

If we simply continue "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth," then the cycle of evil and torture continues, too, just like the first slave discovered in today's parable.

"How often should I forgive?" asked, dear Peter, asking on behalf of us, on behalf of you and me! "How often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times" (Matthew 18:21-22).

Mercy! Lord, have mercy. That means for the rest of our lives. Yes, it does. Forgiveness is not just a one-time event in Christianity. It is our daily practice.

It means letting go, letting go of pain and suffering and loss, letting go of whatever sin tortures and terrifies us. To forgive is to let go. And then, to let others go. How often must we let go of what terrifies us? Over and over again.

Sin and evil do exist in the world. There is no denying that reality. Jesus teaches us that forgiveness and freedom exist in the world, too. They are real, and they change people. Forgiveness and freedom change relationships. Forgiveness and freedom even change countries and religions.

This is why we pray, daily, "Our father, who art in heaven ... forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us."

AMEN.

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