the Rev. Mitchell W. Felton

Enslaved to the Lord

St. Columba’s Episcopal Church

Genesis 50:15-21 & Matthew 18:21-35

Washington, D.C.

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A

September 17th, 2023

I

I think the question is simple for the Gospel reading today. And it’s a question some of us don’t realize we need to ask. It’s a question most of us are afraid to ask.

Certainly, liberal theology won’t ask the question.

And the question is this: Does the slave deserve it?

Does the slave deserve to be tortured because he did not forgive as he was forgiven?

II

There are two narratives of enslaved persons in our readings today. The first is the unforgiving slave narrative which we read in our Gospel.

The slave who we can imagine toiled and tilled tirelessly day by day to support his family.

We are not told how he acquired his debt, though we know it was a significant amount.

For one talent is equivalent to fifteen years of wage. This slave owed a hundred and fifty thousand years' worth of labor.

As the King planned to sell off the slave, his family and their possessions because he could not pay him back, the slave begged and pleaded for his life.

Has life ever gotten you down this bad?

Do you know what it’s like to cry out for justice and instead receive mercy?

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The King, whose heart was broken open out of mercy forgives this slave’s debt.

And yet on the same day, this slave withholds mercy from someone else. How quickly he forgot the mercy he received.

How quickly he forgot liberating power of forgiveness.

How easy it was for him now in a position of authority to use his privilege to oppress and perpetrate violence.

III

The other slave narrative is in our Old Testament reading.

Jospeh, our 17 year old dreamer who was the favorite of his father’s sons and was given a colorful garment, is sold into slavery by his brothers out of bitterness, resentment, and jealously.

And in Joseph’s enslavement in Egypt, four different times does it read, “the Lord was with him”.

Joseph remained faithful amid lustful temptations because The Lord was with him.

Joseph had hope in the midst of despair because the Lord was with him. **What is it like for The Lord to be with you?**

What is it like to know your circumstances will change but our faithful God doesn’t?

What is it like to live and move and have your being in corrupt systems knowing you your held in the hands of the Lord?

Jospeh would forgive his brothers not only by way of words and tears, but in his kind actions towards them.

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IV

Today, we are betwixt and between two slaves. The slave who is unforgiving and the slave who is forgiving.

I am convinced Jesus knew exactly what he was doing when he used the lens of slavery to tell this parable.

Greco Roman slavery was no less cruel than any slavery in other society. It was an institution made to profit from unjust and often unpaid labor

Men, women and children forced into labor.

Men, women and children forced to serve a cruel lord and master. Men, women and children stripped of their dignity.

Families were ripped apart, and it was life devoid of humanity.

We exist between these two slaves in a way we can see ourselves to ask the question, what are we enslaved to?

V

So, it must be a God thing, that Jesus would take this paradigm of the evils of enslavement, and of slave/Lord relationship and turn it for our good.

The hope of the Gospel is Jesus subverts the relationship of the slave and Lord and redeems it.

The hope is the relationship would be different as we see ourselves enslaved to him as our Lord.

In this enslavement to Christ as our Lord we are not forced but have choice and consent.

**To be enslaved to Christ our Lord is to be**

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pardoned from revenge and spite

**And to be chained to righteousness.**

It is to be emancipated from vengeance and pettiness.

**And to be bound to mercy and loving-kindness**

It is to be freed from gaslighting and manipulation

**And shackled to compassion.**

And we are called to a life a total forgiveness, putting all things in subjection under our Christ .

We do all this because we serve a Lord who is not like the other lords.

Our Lord does not delight in sacrifice and does not take pleasure in burnt offerings.

**Our Lord is gracious, gentle, kind and just.**

**Our Lord is about the work of mercy.**

VI

\*Has everyone had a chance to see this? If you haven’t, I encourage you to take one.

Last week, we began our program year. We have these pamphlets out and around for you.

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On the front, this pamphlet gives our mission statement and explains who we are as a parish.

Inside it is our five core priorities.

And on the back is our values, the compass that leads us to live out our mission.

\*So it is today, I, Mitchell Felton, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, called *to be a priest, pastor, and teacher,* re-commit my soul, my life , and my all to the Gospel of Christ crucified and risen and to live God’s Love in a world that needs it.

I will treat people in the way God has treated me.

I will risk being hurt by others and I will forgive them when they hurt me.

And more importantly I will repent and seek forgiveness when I hurt others.

I will wake up and choose to be enslaved to the Living Lord because it is the fullest life that is offered and being enslaved to live God’s love is the way of life and peace.

VII

When I would visit actively dying folks in the hospital, conversations of forgiveness would regularly come up. And the conversation would then shift. And we talk about not *if*, or *when* they would meet their Lord, but rather **how... how** would they meet their Lord.

Forgive.

So simple it must be true. So true, it’s easily forgotten.

And if we forgive...If we forgive as our Lord has forgiven us...

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Then on our last day, and in our dying breath... We will meet the face of our Lord, not in fear or in shame... But in rejoicing.

MWF6