

SO WHAT IS YOUR EXCUSE?

TODAY'S GOSPEL READING IS A STORY MAYBE NOT AS FAMILIAR AS OTHER PARABLES. HOWEVER, THERE IS A COMMON THEME TO THIS STORY NOT UNLIKE OTHERS WE HAVE HEARD. THE THEME IS FORGIVENESS. ANOTHER WELL KNOWN PARABLE THAT COMES TO MIND - THE PRODIGAL SON, AND WHEN JESUS SPOKE SOME OF HIS LAST WORDS ON THE CROSS . FATHER, FORGIVE THEM...+FORGIVENESS IS IMPORTANT IN A DISCIPLE'S LIFE. I BELIEVE IT IS THE REASON JESUS BROUGHT THE SUBJECT UP SO OFTEN. ONE OF THE PETITIONS OF THE LORD'S PRAYER IS FORGIVE US OUR TRESPASSES, SINS, OR DEBTS AS WE ALSO HAVE FORGIVEN OUR TRESPASSES, SINS OR DEBTS.+ THEN IMMEDIATELY AFTER TEACHING THE LORD'S PRAYER JESUS TELLS HIS DISCIPLES FOR IF YOU FORGIVE SOMEONE FOR THEIR TRANSGRESSIONS, YOUR HEAVENLY FATHER WILL ALSO FORGIVE YOU, **BUT** IF YOU DO NOT FORGIVE SOMEONE, THEN YOUR FATHER WILL NOT FORGIVE YOUR TRANSGRESSIONS+THE QUESTION WE MUST THEN ASK OURSELVES IS WHAT IS MY EXCUSE FOR NOT FORGIVING?+ WE CAN RECITE NUMEROUS EXCUSES FOR NOT FORGIVING, BUT AS A DISCIPLE OUR TEACHER BY WORDS AND EXAMPLE REALLY LEAVES US NO CHOICE OTHER THAN TO FORGIVE. WE CAN DECIDE AND CHOSE NOT TO FORGIVE FILLING THE AIR WITH EXCUSES. THE VERY DEFINITION OF AN EXCUSE IS TO EXPLAIN (A FAULT OR AN OFFENSE) IN THE HOPE OF BEING UNDERSTOOD, TO MAKE ALLOWANCE FOR OR TO SERVE AS JUSTIFICATION FOR. MANY OF US, WE CAN

REASON VERY LOGICALLY, NOT ONLY INTERNALLY BUT TO OTHERS, WHY WE CAN NOT, WILL NOT FORGIVE. THIS AMOUNTS TO AN EXCUSE. THE REAL REASON IS WE **CHOOSE** NOT TO FORGIVE. IN THE GOSPEL READING TODAY AND THE OTHER PARABLES THERE WAS A CHOICE TO BE MADE, SOME WITH GOOD RESULTS AND SOME WITH NOT SO GOOD RESULTS. IN MATTHEW THIS STORY OF THE UNFORGIVING SERVANT HAS APPLICATION TO EACH AND EVERY ONE OF US TODAY!! UNLESS OF COURSE WE THINK HUMAN NATURE OR THE FOUNDATIONS OF OUR FAITH HAVE CHANGED. THE STARK FACT THAT STANDS OUT IN THIS STORY IS THAT A HUGE DEBT WAS FORGIVEN WHILE A SMALLER ONE WAS NOT. THE SERVANT OWED HIS MASTER TEN THOUSAND TALENTS. IN OUR MONEY THAT WAS OVER TWELVE MILLION DOLLARS! THAT AMOUNT WAS OVER 150 THOUSAND YEARS OF WAGES. A DEBT NO SERVANT COULD EVER PAY. ONCE FORGIVEN, THE SERVANT WENT OUT TO COLLECT DEBTS OWED HIM. THE DEBTS WERE NOTHING IN COMPARISON TO THAT OWED HIS MASTER. THE DEBT ONE MAN OWED HIM WAS ONLY 100 DENARIL OR TWENTY DOLLARS. DESPITE PLEAS BY THE FELLOW SERVANT THAT HE WOULD PAY, THE UNFORGIVING SERVANT HAD THE MAN THROWN IN JAIL! IS THIS THE TIME WE BEGIN TO FORMULATE EXCUSES OF WHY OR WHY NOT AND MISS THE POINT OF THIS STORY? FOLKS, WE ARE THAT SERVANT AND AN INCALCULABLE DEBT HAS BEEN FORGIVEN BY GOD THROUGH HIS JESUS CHRIST. THERE IS NOTHING, **ABSOLUTELY NOTHING** THAT CAN BE DONE TO US THAT IN ANY WAY COMPARES TO THAT WE HAVE DONE TO GOD. AND IF GOD FORGIVES US

THEN WE **MUST** FORGIVE. IT IS THE GRACE WE ALL LIVE IN EACH AND EVERY DAY. **WE CAN NEVER, NEVER FORGET THAT FACT.** IT IS THE REASON TO GET UP THANKFUL EACH DAY, AND WALK AS HIS DISCIPLE. TO DEMONSTRATE THE LOVE AND FORGIVENESS TO ALL JUST AS IT HAS BEEN SHOWN FIRST TO US. SAD TO SAY, WE ARE JUST LIKE THE SERVANT AND DON'T ALWAYS FORGIVE. WHAT KIND OF EXCUSES DO WE USE TO JUSTIFY NOT FORGIVING SOMEONE? WHAT RESULTS CAN WE EXPECT FROM FORGIVING? NOT FORGIVING? WHAT REALLY IS FORGIVENESS?

EXCUSES, THERE ARE LOTS AND MANY ACTUALLY MAKE SENSE TO OTHERS AND ESPECIALLY TO US. WE CAN BE CERTAIN THE UNFORGIVING SERVANT KNEW IN HIS MIND THE EXCUSES HE WAS USING TO COLLECT HIS SMALL DEBTS OR JAILING PEOPLE JUSTIFIED HIS MEANS. ONE T EXCUSE USED IS . IF I FORGIVE THEN THEY WILL THINK WHAT THEY DID WAS OKAY, THAT YOU SOMEHOW WERE CONDONING IT AND THEY ARE NOT SORRY FOR IT. ANOTHER EXCUSE WE USE IS THAT GETS IN THE WAY IS EGO AND PRIDE. THAT CONVERSATION WE HAVE WITH OURSELVES FREQUENTLY PUTS US ON THE HIGHER MORAL GROUND AND WE ARE RIGHT AND THEY ARE WRONG. THEY DON'T DESERVE OUR FORGIVENESS. ONE OF THE BIGGEST EXCUSES USED IS THE DESIRE FOR JUSTICE OR REVENGE. IF WE ARE WRONGED WE HAVE A **RIGHT** TO SEEK JUSTICE OR REVENGE. NOT FOR THE DISCIPLE. JESUS SHOWED US A DIFFERENT WAY, BUT NOT AN EASY WAY. LIKELY ONE OF THE MOST LOGICAL EXCUSES USED IS IT IS JUST TOO PAINFUL. I AM HURTING

AND DON'T POSSESS GOD'S PERFECT LOVE TO FORGIVE ANOTHER. ALL THESE EXCUSES HAVE NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES. BUT WHEN WE DO REACH OUT AND FORGIVE, THE OUTCOMES ARE MUCH MORE POSITIVE AND LASTING.

THERE ARE MOTIVES, GOOD AND BAD, FOR FORGIVENESS. WE MUST CHECK OUR MOTIVES IN ORDER TO ARRIVE AT THE BEST RESULTS FROM A BAD SITUATION. THE WORST OF ALL REASONS TO GRANT FORGIVENESS IS REVENGE. WE GET EVEN THEN WE WILL FORGIVE. OR WE FORGIVE OUT OF FEAR BECAUSE WE DO NOT WANT TO GET HURT AGAIN. NOR SHOULD WE GRANT FORGIVENESS OUT OF OBLIGATION THAT IS BEING HYPOCRITICAL. OR WE FORGIVE OUT OF APPEARANCES, TO LOOK GOOD. ANOTHER MOTIVE THAT IS FREQUENTLY USED IS FORGIVING FOR HARMONY. FORGET THE PROBLEM AND IT WILL GO AWAY.

AS DISCIPLES WE ARE TO FORGIVE FOR THE RIGHT REASONS. WE FORGIVE BECAUSE WE ARE RELEASED FROM ANGER, HATE AND RESENTMENT. WE ARE IN CONTROL AGAIN AND FREED UP TO MOVE ON. ANOTHER MOTIVE CAN BE EMPATHY. WE CAN LOOK WHERE THE OTHER PERSON WAS COMING FROM AND IT CAN MAKE SENSE FROM THEIR POINT OF VIEW. I MAY NOT HAVE UNDERSTOOD WHY YOU CAUSED HARM BUT I FORGIVE YOU. WHEN WE CAN DO THIS THERE IS REAL FORGIVENESS.

THERE ARE OTHER BENEFITS FROM BEING A FORGIVING PERSON. FORGIVENESS POSITIVELY AFFECTS OUR

HAPPINESS AND HEALTH. WHEN WE HOLD ONTO RESENTMENT AND ANGER IT IS REFLECTED ON THE OUTSIDE AND PEOPLE SEE THAT AND DO NOT WANT TO BE AROUND SUCH A PERSON. STUDIES HAVE SHOWN NOT FORGIVING AND HARBORING ANGER AND RESENTMENT CAN CAUSE A VARIETY OF HEALTH PROBLEMS. HERE IS ONE I WAS SURPRISED TO DISCOVER! . FORGIVENESS ALLOWS US TO SEE OTHERS AS TEACHERS. WHEN WE THINK BACK TO THE SERVANT THE EXAMPLE HIS MASTER DEMONSTRATED SHOULD HAVE TAUGHT HIM A VALUABLE LESSON. WE CAN LEARN FROM EVERY ONE, THE GOOD AND THE BAD EXPERIENCES. FORGIVENESS REMINDS US THAT ALL OF US FAIL AT ONE TIME OR ANOTHER AND NEED FORGIVENESS. LIKE THE SAYING %WHAT GOES AROUND COMES AROUND+ IF WE FORGIVE WE WILL BE FORGIVEN. EPHESIANS REMINDS US TO PUT AWAY ALL ANGER, AND BITTERNESS TO BE FORGIVING, TENDERHEARTED AND KIND TO ONE ANOTHER, **JUST AS GOD HAS FORGIVEN YOU**. RIGHT ALONG WITH THAT IS THE REALIZATION THAT OTHERS WILL FAIL US. WE ARE ALL HUMAN WITH FAULTS AND WE SHOULD NOT PUT TOO HIGH OF EXPECTATIONS ON PEOPLE. FORGIVENESS ALLOWS US TO LET GO OF THE PAST AND MOVE ON.

THERE REMAINS THOUGH QUESTIONS ABOUT WHEN I FORGIVE SOMEONE WHAT DOES IT MEANõ .? FORGIVENESS DOES NOT MEAN FORGETTING, DENYING, IGNORING OR OVERLOOKING THE WRONGS DONE. IT DOES NOT MEAN YOU CAN NOT HOLD SOMEONE ACCOUNTABLE FOR THEIR ACTIONS. IT DOES NOT MEAN YOU HAVE A RIGHT TO CONDEMN SOMEONE OR FEEL

MORALLY SUPERIOR TO THAT PERSON WHO HAS WRONGED YOU. THE BIBLE TELLS US TO NOT THINK TOO HIGHLY OF OURSELVES. JUST BECAUSE YOU DO FORGIVE SOMEONE IT DOES NOT MEAN YOU TRUST THEM, THAT IS SOMETHING EARNED. FORGIVENESS IS NOT FORGETTING, BUT WHEN YOU FORGIVE THERE IS A NEUTRALITY OF FEELINGS. THERE IS NO LONGER ANGER OR HATE. REMEMBER FORGIVENESS IS NOT THE SAME AS RECONCILIATION. RECONCILIATION INVOLVES TWO PEOPLE WORKING TOGETHER TO BRING ABOUT A SOLUTION. A FEW WEEKS AGO THE READING FROM ROMANS 12- %AND IF IT IS POSSIBLE, ACCORDING TO WHAT IS WITHIN YOU, MAKE PEACE WITH EVERY PERSON.+ AS DISCIPLES OF JESUS CHRIST, WHO IS OUR EXAMPLE, THIS IS WHAT WE ARE CALLED TO DO.

IN THE BEGINNING OF TODAY'S GOSPEL READING PETER IS UP AHEAD OF THE REST OF THE DISCIPLES WHEN HE ASKS THE QUESTION AND GIVES WHAT HE THOUGHT WAS A GREAT ANSWER ON FORGIVENESS.. WHY? BECAUSE ACCORDING TO JEWISH LAW AT THE TIME YOU FORGAVE A PERSON THREE TIMES, SO PETER DOUBLES THE NUMBER OF TIMES YOU ARE TO FORGIVE SOMEONE AND TOSSES IN AN EXTRA FORGIVENESS. WELL, JESUS TOTALLY SURPRISES PETER WITH THE ANSWER OF SEVENTY TIMES SEVEN. THE MEANING HERE IS TO FORGIVE UNTIL THE END OF TIME, WHICH RELATES BACK TO THE OLD TESTAMENT IN DANIEL AND END TIMES. JESUS IS TELLING US THAT WE CANNOT PLACE LIMITS ON FORGIVENESS.

On Monday, Dec. 1, 1997, a dozen students gathered to pray . as they did every morning . outside the administration building of Heath High School in Paducah, KY. As the students finished praying, a fourteen-year-old freshman boy walked up to the group with a .22 caliber pistol and began firing into the prayer circle. When the shooting was over, three students were dead and five others were seriously wounded. The students in the prayer circle had done nothing to provoke the shooting. In fact, some of the students in the circle had even befriended the shooter before this event. The secular media was at a loss to explain what happened. Melissa Jenkins was in that prayer circle. She was fifteen years old and she lay in a hospital bed a week after the shootings fully aware that the damage to her spinal cord was so severe that she would be a paraplegic for the rest of her life. She sent this message to the young man who had deliberately shot her: %Tell him I forgive him.+Melissa understood and practiced what Jesus taught --She forgave beyond any reasonable human limits.

The parable of the unforgiving servant, how insightful of Jesus to use money and forgiveness in the same parable! Two of the most difficult areas for people to submit to God are their possessions and their hurts. Amen.

THERE IS AN ACRONYM FOR FORGIVEõ

F . FAITH, O . OBEDIENCE, R . RIGHTEOUSNESS, G . GRACE, I- INHERITANCE, V . VICTORY, E . EDIFY.