

Sermon – Matthew 18:21-25

David R. Lyle

Grace Lutheran Church

15 Pentecost – Year A

13 September 2020

### “Payback”

Sisters and brothers, friends in Christ, grace be unto you and peace this day, in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. “Follow the money.” While this phrase did not show up in the book about Watergate, it was made famous in the movie version of *All the President’s Men*. What reporter Bob Woodward actually said to Sen. Sam Ervin was, “The key was the secret campaign cash, and it should all be traced.” But that’s not nearly as pithy as “Follow the money.” If you want to know what a person or an organization’s values are, or if you want to trace what they’d just as soon keep hidden, follow the money. It’s true in politics; it’s true in other areas, too. You can tell a lot by looking at budgets; this is certainly true for churches. You can do a deep dive into what *you* really value by looking at your spending habits. What we tell others about what we believe, what we think of as our deepest values, may or may not match up with what we really care about. If you want to know the truth, follow the money. Those who give expect to be paid back in some way. You can discover where the power is by figuring out who is in debt to whom.
2. This is the straightforward setup to the parable Jesus tells today. There is a king who was apparently fairly liberal in his lending. When he sits down one night and opens up QuickBooks, he realizes that there is a servant who owes him ten thousand talents. One wonders what this guy did to get so far into debt; by some estimates that’s about \$3.5 billion in today’s money. Which isn’t *that* much, I suppose. After all, there are 237 Americans who have that

much money, according to the Forbes 400. Then again, I imagine *those* people can pay their debts. But because it would take the average person about 200,000 years to earn enough money to pay back this debt, it's clear the servant doesn't have a chance. He's as good as dead, or worse. The king knows he won't get more than pennies for dollars but is willing to settle for what he can get. He orders the man, along with wife, children, and possessions, to be sold. Better, the king thinks, to cut his losses and move on. Following the money, there's only one rational choice to make. Get what you can from the debtor and cast him aside. That's how the world works. Desperate, "The slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.'" In this moment, Jesus turns the story on its head by turning the king to his heart: "And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt."

3. Please note the key point, for on it hinges the truth of the gospel: The king does not forgive the slave his debt because he believes in the slave's farcical claim of repayment. Unless the slave is married to Jeff Bezos's second cousin, there's no way he has access to this sort of money. The parable may be a bit funny but it's not a joke. Jesus makes clear that it is the king's own pity, not the slave's pathetic bargaining, that changes the king's mind. The king is moved by pity, by regarding the suffering of another and being turned to compassion. Better, we can look to the Greek, which here is *splanchnistheis*, or "from the bowels", the seat of compassion. In other words, the king does not change his mind because it makes sense to do so or because it will do him any good; the king's mind is changed by a change within himself. For whatever reason, he is tired of debt collection and done with keeping accounts. The debt does not just go away, of course. It has to be paid by someone. In forgiving the debt, the king is essentially paying it back on behalf of the slave. For some reason that has nothing to do with accounting or worldly wisdom, the king decides that this slave's life and freedom are more important than keeping straight his ledgers. The debt is cancelled, not for the

slave's promise but for the master's grace. When you follow the money, you come to the most shocking conclusion. This king is willing to let the money trail evaporate, the debt dissolve, for the sake of another.

4. Jesus tells this parable in response to Peter's question: "How often should I forgive? Seven times?" Seven is the number of completion, of fullness. Should Peter forgive completely, fully? No, Jesus says. Try completion multiplied by fullness; *that's* a good start. You want the kingdom of heaven, Peter? *That* kingdom has a king who is keenly aware of debt, of human sin inflicted upon God and neighbor. But *that* kingdom also has a king who is more interested in love than punishment. The debt, however, cannot simply be ignored. Not because God is a fastidious bean counter, but because sin has actual consequences that need to be dealt with. To say that sin needs to be paid back is not to say that God needs satisfaction for God's sake; it is, rather, to say that God is painfully aware of the effects of human sin. At the end of the day, God deals with sin and its effects *not* by making others pay an unpayable debt. No; God takes on both pain and payment, letting us, for pity's sake, walk away. If you follow the money, the trail of debt upon debt, you will find yourself at the foot of the cross. There, the trail simply disappears. We find ourselves in a tomb emptied of bank tellers, nothing but blue sky and clean ledgers in front of us. God knew we could never pay back what we owed, never rectify what we had done. Not to God, and not to one another. So, God has pity. Mercy. Compassion. A change of heart. God is out of the debt collection business. Our debts have been paid in full; not because of our bargaining, but because God, for Jesus' sake, looks upon us with mercy. And that, dear friends, is the gospel.
5. But you'll notice it is not the end of the parable. Jesus knows that we are more committed to bookkeeping, to our false ideas of justice and fairness, than God is. What does this yahoo of a servant do? Taking his newfound freedom for a ride, he goes to settle accounts. His fellow slave owes him 100

denarii. This isn't chump change, mind you; it's perhaps a third of a year's wages, maybe \$35,000. Not nothing, but also not 10,000 talents. And what does the first slave do? He locks his erstwhile buddy away until he can pay, which really is only slightly more likely than the first slave paying back the king. Jesus wants us to react in precisely the way we are reacting, by saying something like, "What a jerk!" But the parable continues to locate us in the person of the first slave, not the second. We who have been forgiven much forgive far too little. To be sure, there is warning here. Such reprobate behavior does, perhaps, endanger our souls. But there's another point Jesus is making: Forgiving one another is difficult, even after we ourselves have been forgiven. Forgiveness wasn't easy for the king. It cost him something. It will cost us something, too. It will force us to quit the debt collection business. It will, in short, make us die to ourselves so that we can live for others – even for others who have sinned against us. Precisely, you see, for what we pray in the words given to us by Jesus in the Lord's Prayer.

6. This does mean that evil should go unchecked, or that sin is without consequence. Still, forgiveness is at the heart of what it means to be a followers of Jesus. Pastor Kathryn Schifferdecker tells the story of Corrie ten Boom, imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp for hiding Jews in her home. Her sister died in the camp, but she lived and spent her time after the war travelling through Europe, preaching forgiveness and reconciliation through Christ. In 1947, she recognized a former camp guard at one of her talks. He came up to her, told her he had become a Christian, and that he knew God had forgiven him. He held out his hand; she felt nothing but anger in return. She writes, "I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion – I knew that, too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. 'Jesus, help me!' I prayed silently. 'I can lift my hand, I can do that much. You supply the feeling.' And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The

current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands." Ten Boom continues, "I forgive you, brother!" I cried. 'With all my heart!' For a long moment we grasped each other's hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God's love so intensely as I did then." Ten Boom had this guard in her debt. She could have squeezed payment out of him in one way or another, even if only by carrying her anger forever. But following the sacrifice of Jesus, she sacrificed her need for payment, for anything at all other than a future built upon grace. This neither undid the man's crimes nor gave him permission to sin again. But it gave him again the grace to live a new life in Christ; this is the gift given to him by ten Boom's forgiveness. God's change of heart led to a change of action; may such actions lead to a change in our hearts.

7. Dr. Nancy Koester puts it well: "As Christians we live as forgiven sinners. And the parable teaches that we are also to live as forgiving sinners." Friends, you can follow the money; chase the trail of debt as far as it will go. You'll get no further than the cross, where the trail of debt goes cold forever. Why would you leave this spot and pick up again your own petty ledgers? This is the gospel: God forgives you for the sake of Jesus, he who died and was raised for you. You have nothing to do with earning this grace. It is simply given. Why would you now ask more of one another? God values you more than God values what you owe. Jesus Christ has paid your debt, washed your slate clean, and invites you now to follow something else: him. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.