

Reflection for the 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 13, 2020
Matthew 18:21-35

Heard from the 1st Century

This year on the 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time, we hear Jesus tell the parable of “the unforgiving debtor.” Jesus, ever the master preacher and story teller, speaks directly to us from Matthew’s Gospel. His message is about love and forgiveness told with an image that, while it may have been relatable to 1st century disciples, may be difficult for 20th century followers committed to racial justice and addressing the sins of subjugation and oppression.

It is useful for us to address “the elephant in the room,” our desire to overlook the scripture’s image of a king who owns servants who owe him money. The harsh king in the parable is about to recover a debt owed him by selling his property—a servant, his wife, children, and all the family’s possessions.

Jaime L. Waters, associate professor of Catholic Studies at DePaul University in Chicago, writing in *America* (September 2020), presents the problem with Matthew’s account this way:

“...God is imagined as a royal overlord, and humans are indebted servants. The parable reflects social reality of Matthew’s time, in which slavery and debt bondage were accepted practices...Today’s Gospel takes for granted the practice of keeping and acquiring new slaves to increase one’s wealth. Unfortunately, such biblical texts influenced European slave owners, who justified their actions based on beliefs in white supremacy and divine right.” (p.72)

Having placed this story in the context of the first century and having acknowledged the difficulty and pain this parable may cause some readers today, we can reflect on the irony of its strong social justice message. The mercy and forgiveness of Jesus Christ, shown to us sinners, cannot be withheld from those who wrong us. The words of Jesus calling us to pray the Our Father, “...give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us...” tell us that we must forgive our transgressing brothers and sisters “...not seven times but seventy-seven times.”

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