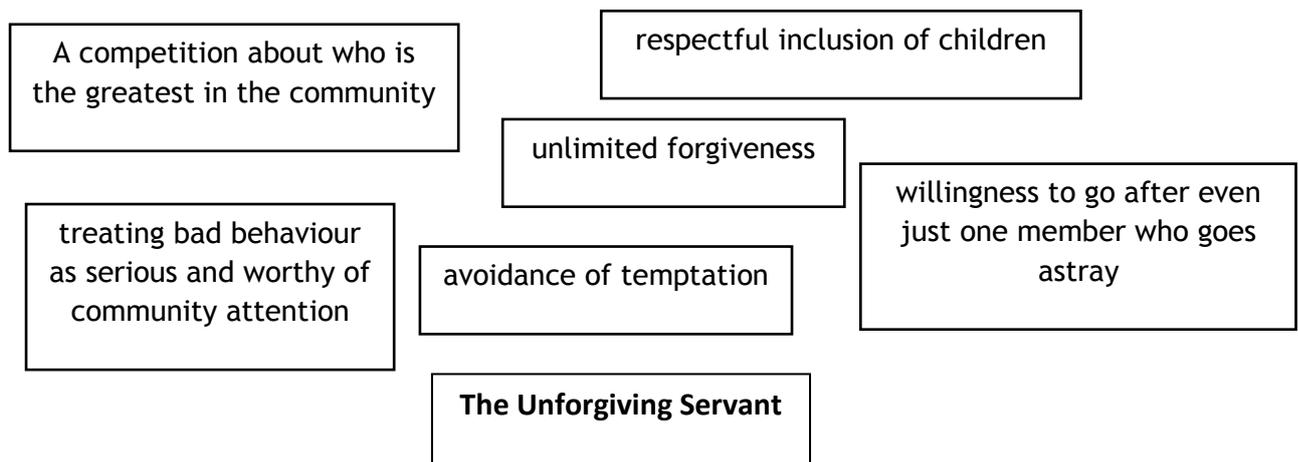


Date: September 13, 2020

Reading: Matthew 18:21 - 35

Theme: Compare the pair



Like pieces of a puzzle, or components of a tapestry, Matthew assembles issues that affect how we live as the people of God in this one chapter, and brings them all into focus, and completeness, through a parable that in its exaggerations and hyperbole makes it clear that in our situations and conflicts and issues, any comparison we make to define our behaviour is not with another person, or another organisation or some piece of wisdom. Our comparison is to God. Compare the pair: God who forgives us an unimaginable amount, day after day, and us, who struggle to accept the annoying person in the next pew.

Our issues, and arguments, and claims to superior knowledge are like blades of grass arguing about who is taller next to a mountain! And the parable, as well as giving a lesson in forgiveness and acceptance, captures that immense difference in scale between us and God. The parable is filled with ridiculous exaggerations that call us to scoff with cries of, “That’s not possible”. The attempts to translate the size of the servant’s debt - \$2.5 billion or so - miss the point. 10,000 was the largest number in Greek and a talent was the largest measure of currency or wealth, so an amount of 10,000 talents is pure hyperbole, an amount Jesus mentions to indicate to the audience that payment of this debt would be unachievable. The pleading of the servant for patience and time to repay is as ridiculous as the amount. And to receive that much grace, that much good, life changing news, and then go out and, not just demand payment of a trifling debt but to demand it with violence, is also hyperbole and ridiculous. This is a parable that shocks and amazes and it’s as if Jesus is grabbing the listener by the shoulders and shaking them, saying, “Look how ridiculous your petty complaints are in comparison with God’s grace for you.” This passage from Matthew is part two of teaching about forgiveness and reconciliation within the community of faith, but the parable is also part seven of this whole chapter about getting disciples to stop thinking like people and to try to start thinking like people who look to God for guidance.

The angry end to the parable takes it into another area of theology but not away from the fundamental point. We need to always hold to being the people of God, and all that comes with the concept of God, and not just called to be nice. Forgiveness and reconciliation is serious business, as shown by the seriousness of the cross.

The process we looked at last week for reconciling people when there is conflict or bad behaviour may look like the sort of process put in place by a service organisation or a human resources department. It's all about preserving privacy and dignity and not humiliating the wrong doer. But that is because those service organisations and human resources departments have caught onto what the early church discovered when they started thinking like God instead of thinking like people. You don't immediately jump to condemnation or gossip and hound the wrong doer out of the community, you follow the example of God who leaves the 99 and goes after the 1. You don't forgive the wrong doer 7 times, even with the exhaustive process of reconciliation we looked at last week, you follow the example of God who has come close to us in Jesus the Christ and accepted us with all our faults and failings and who goes on accepting us day by day when we falter and fail.

The Apostle Paul was taking a similar path in writing to the new church at Rome. A human organisation structures itself on similarity, wanting all the members to accept and follow the same ideas, the same culture, the same behaviour, but God thinks differently. God thinks in terms of difference and harmony and all the differences in culture and practice between the Jewish members of the church and the Gentile members, between the guild members and the slave members, are part of being the people of God. So, Paul tells the Romans, "Don't force all your members to worship the same way, or have the same culture, or honour their faith with the same behaviour. God has accepted you all, with all your differences, so let each person honour their faith before God." Think more like God, who has welcomed all these different cultures and backgrounds into the Body of Christ, and less like people who want unity through sameness.

In our community, here at Highfield Rd, we have people with differences in theology and Biblical interpretations, differences in musical tastes and worship style, differences in interest in the traditions of the church or in ecumenical relations. And we have people who have long standing disagreements and even conflicts. We have had examples of bad behaviour and wounded people. And the only way through all of that is to look to God for guidance. To hear the parable of the unforgiving servant and start to think more like God and less like people. To recognise that in comparison to our God of love and inclusion, our problems and issues are small and solvable. To take on humility and seek reconciliation, and reunion, in and with the community. To refrain from criticising difference in worship or piety. To accept that we are all frail, faltering humans trying to do our best, and treat each other with welcome, inclusion and compassion. The walk of discipleship is not easy, because the pull of the world and the ways of the world is strong, but we walk in the shadow of our loving God and we walk in the company of Jesus who lived a life of compassion and inclusion and showed the way of God.

Rev Ross Pearce ©

A competition about who is the greatest in the community

Respectful inclusion of children

treating bad behaviour as serious and worthy of community attention

The Forgiving Servant

willingness to go after even just one member who goes astray

avoidance of temptation

unlimited forgiveness