

*Perfectly Understandable*  
Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost  
September 14, 2014  
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Texts: Exodus 14.19-31;  
Exodus 15.1-11, 20-21;  
Romans 14. 1-12;  
Matthew 18. 21-35

Imagine you were there. Sneaking out in the dead of night; marching forward, determined, fueled by the promise of freedom but constantly watching behind you. Suddenly you see water right in front of you; you see the soldiers closing in behind. You can taste the fear in the back of your throat when all of a sudden there's a pathway right in front of you. You don't know where it came from. You don't care. You just charge forward hoping it will hold and praying you will get to the other side. When you do you see that the soldiers found the same pathway. The fear kicks in again; the adrenaline coursing through your body as you prepare for the worst. Then just as the sun is beginning to rise the strong and mighty army with death and destruction in their veins are swept away right in front of your eyes. You're safe. You made it. Your heart is still in your throat when Miriam begins to sing and everyone breaks out in dance and the jubilation begins because you were all as good as dead and out of no way God has made a way.

This song of Miriam and Moses is one of the oldest pieces of Scripture that we have. It's a song of unbelievable triumph against all odds that points to God as the One who brings liberation. It's a song that celebrates that freedom is at the center of God's will for us.

Have you ever read the full text of Miriam's song? I just lifted out the theological center of it just now when I described it. It's a rather graphic description of their enemy's destruction. I'm aware that in my relative safety and from my progressive peacenik perspective I cringe a bit at the celebration of violence that surrounds this song. But if I go back to the space where I imagine I am there then the graphic details of Miriam's song

are perfectly understandable from a human point of view....inevitable even. It's just not the trajectory of the gospel.

It feels important to say at this point: the trajectory of the gospel kind of blows my mind. So there's that. Even if the place where God is drawing us all to go weren't so mind blowing, it feels humanely impossible to get there. I have deep empathy for the question that Peter brings to Jesus as he listens to the teaching about the kingdom that Jesus has been spinning over these last weeks in the gospel of Matthew. Peter essentially says "I hear you talking about true greatness, and temptation, and how to handle conflict but let's circle back to this whole question of forgiveness... how often do we need to forgive?" Without knowing the precise translation of the Greek here - let's say that Jesus' answer was essentially EVERY SINGLE TIME. That doesn't just blow the mind - it feels humanely impossible to do.

Nadia Boltz Weber is a fabulous Lutheran preacher and blogger who raises all kinds of disturbing questions about this parable in one of her blogs on this text. She concludes by saying all those questions are really red herrings - ways to distract ourselves from what is truly hard about this parable. The "*hardest* question is this: *From where will we attain this forgiveness for those who have caused us harm?* I'll tell you one thing for sure. It ain't in my heart. No sir. It's kinda dark in there."<sup>1</sup> Isn't that the truth of the matter for most of us?

So let's look at this parable for a moment. We have a king who is settling accounts with his slaves and one of them owes an absurdly large amount of money - more than he could ever hope to repay in a lifetime. The king initially orders that he be sold along with his wife and his children so that payment could be made. Just to name one of the disturbing questions I mentioned a moment ago: is God the king in this scenario? Because if so then "Yikes!" But let's keep going...so the slave begs for mercy and the king remarkably and inexplicably forgives the whole debt and sets him free. But then that same slave makes a bee line for someone who owes him an absurdly small amount of money, takes him by the throat and demands to be paid, and throws him into prison when he begs for mercy. I know at

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<sup>1</sup> Nadia Boltz Weber from her blog <http://thq.wearesparkhouse.org/yeara/ordinary24gospel-2/>

this point, it's tempting to jump on the bandwagon with his fellow servants the ones who are outraged by his hypocrisy and go running back to the king to complain about his horrid behavior. And clearly the king agrees with them because any mercy he initially offered is revoked in anger as he hears about this turning of the tables. The ungrateful servant is handed over to be tortured until his debt is paid in full.

Again if God is the king in this scenario can I say again "Yikes!" To be fair and clear: the writer of Matthew seems comfortable with that very straightforward reading of the parable and offer the summary statement in vs. 35 as Jesus' own words: "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

I want to set aside that question of whether the summary statement is a latter addition or an original part of Jesus' teaching. I want to take a step back and bring a lens to this parable that helps to shed some light on the more central question I mentioned a moment before: where can we find the kind of forgiveness that Jesus is calling us to live into and what is holding us back?

The lens that I am speaking of comes from research Professor Brene` Brown, a PhD in Social Work, conducted on the subject of how shame shapes the way human beings think, feel and behave. I'm just getting started with her book (which was published in 2007) but the opening chapter on *Understanding Shame*<sup>2</sup> turned the flood lights on for me as I was reading this parable. I hope many of us are aware of the distinction between shame and guilt that psychologists have been making for some time. Guilt has to do with feeling badly because of something we have done; a discreet action that we compare to our own ethics and values we know it is wrong and feel badly about it. Shame is a whole other animal. It has to do with feeling badly about who we are deep in our soul. It goes far beyond a single act to feeling badly about who we are as a person.

Guilt is not always a bad thing. It can be that voice of conscience that triggers for us a signal that something is not right and needs our attention.

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<sup>2</sup> Brene Brown, *I Thought it was Just Me (But It Isn't): Making the Journey from "What Will People Think?" to "I Am Enough"* (New York, NY: Gotham Books, 2007).

Shame, on the other hand, is often destructive. The pain of experiencing shame can be so intense, that people out of self-protection can often lash out in anger and blame against those around them. What Brown identified in her research is that shame (which comes from outside of us from the messages and expectations of our culture) unravels our connections to one another.<sup>3</sup> Shame threatens that deep, innate need we all have to belong and to be valued for who we are.

Go back and see this passage through the lens of how shame and suddenly ever action and reaction that unfolds throughout this parable is perfectly understandable from a human perspective. From the angry backlash of the shamed servant to the judgment of the crowds who observe him to the rage of the king.

Jesus tells this parable to expose the perfectly understandable yet deadly ways we are all tempted to operate. The summary, in the harsh language of hyperbole, is meant to shock us into seeing the trajectory of the gospel which is to cultivate a forgiveness that connects heart to heart. If shame unravels the connections between us; the vision of the gospel is for forgiveness to knit those connections back together.

How do we break the cycle of perfectly understandable reactivity and attain the forgiveness that the gospel holds out to us? Brown's research shows what God's people have been discovering over the centuries --- we break the cycle as we cultivate compassion. Brown identifies several key dimensions to becoming resilient to the effects of shame and compassion is chief among them. Coming to understand and receive the compassion God offers us; learning *live* in that compassion for ourselves makes it possible to extend compassion to each other.

So let me show you where the trajectory of the gospel leads. Go with me back to the banks of the Red Sea. Remember the songs of glee at the destruction of their enemies? Somehow over the centuries as that moment of liberation and freedom is celebrated a prayer of grief and sorrow for the suffering of the Egyptians finds its way into the liturgies of remembrance.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, xxiv-xxv.

In fact the compassion that God has cultivated within the Hebrew heart has knit these so called enemies back together. Gordon pointed me to a passage from Isaiah this week that absolutely blows the mind if you hear it with the context of standing on the shore after the crossing of the Red Sea. Isaiah 19.24-25 "On that day Israel will be third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying "Blessed be Egypt and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage."

This is the trajectory of the gospel: to move us beyond perfectly understandable human reactivity into a way of life that is infused by the liberating power of God's unending grace!

I know - it blows the mind and feels humanly impossible to achieve but the God we serve is in the business of liberation and our freedom is the center of God's will for us.

Thanks be to God!