

Sermon, September 13, 2020

Good morning! Welcome to Stay-At-Home worship from St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Oakland, Maryland. I am Pastor Scott Robinson, and today we welcome back our good friends Jenny and Nathan Wilson for special music. Jenny and Nathan are based in Morgantown, but perform all over the east, from Maine to Florida. You should check out their Facebook page, or Google website. We are still waiting for a safe time to resume regular public worship. Pandemic cases and deaths are still rising, and many, if not most of our members are either in high-risk groups, or they spend time with friends and family members who are.

We do not want to endanger anyone unnecessarily, so please bear with us. If you have friends or family members who do not have internet service, you can easily record this service on your laptop and sit down and share it with them. I would be glad to show you how. Even if they don't care for the service, I bet they would like seeing you. Meanwhile, if you would like to help St. Mark's pay its bills and keep its mission and benevolence commitments during these difficult times, there is a secure Donate button on the church's website, which is stmarksoakland.com (no spaces or caps). Now today's stupid joke.

The wealthiest man in town passed away without an obvious heir, and the funeral home was packed. The new pastor noticed one guy in the corner by himself who just couldn't stop sobbing. So he walked over to him, put his hand on his shoulder and said, "You must have been a very close relative." The man said, "No. We're not related." The pastor said, "Oh. Well it's tough to lose dear friends too." And the man said, "I barely knew him."

The pastor said, "Well if you aren't a close friend or family member of the deceased, what are you so upset about?" And he said, "THAT!"

Music

The Lord be with you. Let us pray.

O Lord God, merciful judge, you are the inexhaustible fountain of forgiveness. Replace our hearts of stone with hearts that love and adore you, that we may delight in doing your will. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

A reading from Genesis, the fiftieth chapter.

Realizing that their father [Jacob] was dead, Joseph's brothers said, "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?" So they approached Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this instruction before he died, 'Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.' Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father."

Joseph wept when they spoke to him. Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, "We are here as your slaves." But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones." In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

Here ends the reading.

The Holy Gospel of the Lord, according to Matthew, the eighteenth chapter.

Then Peter came and said to [Jesus], "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?"

Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.

When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made.

So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.'

Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt.

When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?'

And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

The Gospel of the Lord.

Let us pray. God of wisdom may your Word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Amen.

Comedian Emo Philips says when he was a kid, he used to pray every night for a bicycle. But then he realized the Lord doesn't work that way. So he stole a bike and then prayed that God would forgive him.

Forgiveness is a common theme in both the Old and the New Testaments, especially in the gospels of Luke and Matthew. Today Jesus continued a conversation about forgiveness with his disciples that started last week. If you recall, forgiveness was described there mostly as learning to let-go of things or just put them behind you; especially situations in which you were hurt or offended or wronged by another person. Today forgiveness is described more as an act of mercy rather than just forgetting.

It is forgiveness granted from your heart, and not so much for your own peace of mind. For relieving the burden of another, rather than just releasing the burdens that anger and indignation have placed on you.

Emo Philips is a funny guy. But you know... sometimes, so was Jesus! Unfortunately most of his humor gets lost in translation. The idea in today's parable that a servant WOULD or even possibly COULD owe a king 10,000 talents is—well, it's slapstick silly.

The Talent was a monetary unit worth 6,000 denarii. The denarius was a coin equivalent to a day's pay for a common laborer.

The idea that a servant could owe a king 10,000 talents would be like me telling you that the guy who cuts the grass here at church owes me roughly three and a half billion dollars. So of course this parable sounds over the top. It was meant to. This parable seems pretty self-explanatory. Way back in chapter six Jesus taught us to pray, "Forgive us our trespasses or debts the way we forgive those who trespass against us or are indebted to us."

Today Jesus essentially said, "Okay guys, you got your wish. God WILL INDEED forgive you---the same way you forgive others."

But that's not really good news, is it? Because we clearly aren't as forgiving as we could, or probably should be. Perhaps we should amend the Lord's Prayer to say something like, "Forgive us our trespasses sort of like we think we probably SHOULD forgive those who trespass against us, even though we don't." Or maybe we should instead reconsider our own willingness to forgive. This time from our hearts. With mercy.

Of course Jesus doesn't REALLY expect us to be as forgiving as God. Maybe just a little more like Ruby Bridges.

If you are my age or older, you probably remember Ruby from the TV news. Born in Tylertown, Mississippi in 1954, Ruby and her parents moved to New Orleans when she was four years old. In 1960 her parents responded to a call from the NAACP, volunteering their daughter to be one of the first participants in the court-ordered integration of the Louisiana Public School System.

The Supreme Court's Brown vs. the Board of Education case had mandated that six years earlier. But in the Deep South virtually NO school boards had taken any steps toward do so.

In all, Six New Orleans Black children were chosen for that first round. They were divided up into two groups of three, but at the last minute the other two in Ruby's group dropped out.

So when Ruby Bridges reported for her first day of first grade at William Frantz Elementary School she was the ONLY Black person at an all-white school.

When she first arrived on campus, a huge crowd of white people had gathered, and they were shouting and throwing things. Ruby first thought maybe it was Mardi Gras all over again. But it wasn't. The crowd had instead gathered in vehement protest against...her. And no, those weren't Mardi Gras beads or candy or favors they were throwing. They were rocks and cans and bottles and anything else that wasn't nailed down.

U.S. Marshals were assigned to walk Ruby into the school for her own protection. The late Deputy Marshall Charles Burks was one of them. He reminisced, "You know, that little six-year old showed a lot of courage. She never cried. She never whimpered. She just marched along like a little soldier, and we were all very proud of her."

Once the marshals got her through the school's front door, the white parents barged in and yanked their children out of the classrooms. The teachers all walked-out too.

So other than the marshals, six-year-old Ruby Bridges spent her first day of first grade pretty much alone. Eventually some of the white parents relented and sent their kids back to school, but still nobody wanted to teach Ruby. So the school board did an emergency hire of one Barbara Henry, a white teacher from Massachusetts. Henry ended up teaching Ruby everything from gym to math to music, for the entire year, in a classroom all by herself.

One particular white woman showed-up every day to taunt and shout at Ruby, saying she was going to poison her. President Dwight Eisenhower took that threat seriously, and ordered that, for lunch, Ruby was only allowed to eat what she herself brought from her own home. Another woman put a Black baby doll in a little wooden coffin and waved it at Ruby every day she walked by.

Ruby said THAT scared her more than any of the rocks or bottles or name calling. Soon Ruby's father was fired from his job for no apparent reason. Her grandparents, who were sharecroppers back in Mississippi, were suddenly put off the land they had been farming for decades.

A few days into the mob scene that greeted her every single morning, a teacher noticed that as Ruby approached the school, she would start mumbling something to herself amid all the taunts, racial epithets and various missiles being hurled at her.

Dr. Robert Coles, a child psychiatrist who volunteered to counsel Ruby and her parents, eventually asked Ruby what she was saying in those moments, and the six-year-old said she was praying for all those white parents and protestors. Startled, he asked Ruby WHY she would pray for THEM, and she replied, "Because they NEED a whoooooole lot of praying for."

When asked what exactly she said to God in those prayers, she said it's a prayer that she learned in church: "Father forgive them. They don't know what they're doing."

Five years later over in Selma, Alabama, a group of Black high school students would organize a peaceful after-school Civil Rights march. Peaceful, that is, until Sheriff James Gardner Clark arrived and ordered his deputies to start pushing the kids around.

They used cattle prods on them and poked and shoved them, pushing them out to an old prison camp on the outskirts of town, where they kept at it until the kids were crying, and shaking and vomiting.

A couple of days later Sheriff Clark was hospitalized with chest pains. And that SAME group of kids showed up outside the Selma hospital with signs. Get-well signs. And the kids held hands and prayed together for the sheriff's recovery. Clark got better. Don't know if the kids' prayers helped his BODY. They apparently didn't help his soul. Because Sheriff Clark went right back to tear-gassing, beating and arresting peaceful demonstrators, along with any Black people who tried to register to vote. Eventually some did manage to register. And they joined a growing number of white folks who were fed-up with Clark and voted him out of office. Did the prayers of those kids change their enemy? Apparently not. But they changed the kids. And I think helped eventually to change the world.

Meanwhile William Frantz Elementary was full again by the time Ruby entered second grade. With a mix of white and black kids who mostly got along just fine. The father of one of her new white friends offered Ruby's dad a job. She eventually graduated from a fully-integrated high school and worked as a travel agent for fifteen years, before becoming a wife and full-time mother to four sons.

In 1999 Ruby Bridges Hall started the Ruby Bridges Foundation to promote tolerance and create change through education. Ruby traveled the country for years, speaking to school groups about tolerance. According to Ruby, "Racism is a grown-up disease and we must stop using our children to spread it." Sometimes Barbara Henry, her first-grade teacher, appeared with her. But nowadays Mrs. Henry doesn't travel much. She recently turned eighty-eight years young.

In 2000 Ruby was made an honorary U.S. Marshall at a solemn ceremony in Washington D.C.. And was presented the Carter G.

Woodson Book Award for her autobiographical work, entitled, “Through My Eyes.”

Eight months before 9/11, just before leaving office, Bill Clinton awarded Ruby Bridges a Presidential Citizens Medal. Next to the Medal of Freedom, that is the highest civilian honor a U.S. citizen can receive. Five years after that out in California, the Alameda Unified School District opened its brand new state-of-the-art Ruby Bridges Elementary School.

In 2005 William Frantz Elementary was badly damaged in Hurricane Katrina, and the board of education decided to close it. But instead a group of community volunteers rebuilt it, and the school operates today as the Akili Academy Charter School, where 74% of the students are poor, 97% are Black. 2% are Hispanic. A handful of White students are fully welcomed and accepted, and all students work hard together, aspiring to succeed in college. Ruby received an honorary degree from Tulane University in 2012.

Akili unveiled a statue in its courtyard six years ago, on the fifty-fourth anniversary of the integration of the school. It depicts a six-year-old girl, who looks like she’s half smiling and half mumbling something. Barbara Henry was there for the unveiling, sitting with then 60-year old Ruby Bridges Hall, and retired U.S. Marshall Charlie Burks.

A growing number of Americans find Jesus Christ irrelevant in today’s world. His notion of forgiving those who sin against us seventy-seven times sounds ---well-- slapstick silly. Prayers for our enemies still don’t often change them. Jesus certainly knew they wouldn’t.

But he also knew how prayer can change us, and eventually change the world. And when we pray for our enemies, maybe we could also work on trying to forgive them. You know--from our hearts this time. With mercy. Like a certain group of Black high schoolers in Selma a half century ago. And a white teacher from Massachusetts.

And a cute little pig-tailed six-year-old Black girl in New Orleans, who figured out that's the way to let the healing begin. Fortunately a lot has changed since 1960. Unfortunately a lot has NOT. Ours remains a troubled world. Filled with folks who still need...a whoooole lot of praying for.

Amen.
