

Down The Up Staircase – Matthew 18:21-35

June 9, 2024

The story from Matthew 18 is a comment by Jesus prompted by Peter's question on the topic of forgiveness. The focus is on one strand of the larger topic. Much of the message today comes from a man called Eugene Lowry, professor of preaching at St. Paul's School of Theology in Kansas City, Missouri. I have left his text basically intact, yet have interspersed some of my own comments here and there. His title for this passage was, Down The Up Staircase.

A man owed a whole lot of money. Surely, he wasn't surprised when he was summoned to the inner chambers of the king. He left his abode, went across the territory until he reached the palace, climbed the flight of stairs and went through the double doors. If you were listening closely, you notice that Jesus didn't mention the stairs. That was an inadvertent omission. He meant to say it.

There had to be a flight of stairs. You never go to the seat of power without climbing a flight of stairs. I was raised in western Kansa where there are no hills. Back in the old days when they built a county courthouse, they'd bring in the bulldozers and create a hill so they could build a flight of stairs. Today, they'd be more sensitive. They'd put in a ramp. It's still uphill all the way.

This man climbed the flight of stairs, went through the double doors, was ushered into the inner chamber of the king and stood there waiting until the king made his appearance. The man bowed dutifully. Just then an aide carries out a huge ledger and opens it to the page where this man's name appears on the upper right-hand corner.

The king looks at the bottom line on the ledger sheet and says, "Servant, it says you owe me a lot of money." Yes sir. You owe me 10,000 talents. Yes sir. I want my money. Yes sir. I want my money now. Oh yes sir. Uh, no Sir. I mean I don't have 10,000 talents. The king turns to the aides who brought in the book and they begin a discussion about selling the man, his wife and children into slavery and disposing of their personal property to recoup what little they can of the huge debt. When the king turns around, he finds the servant down on the carpet on his knees. I think I see a tear rolling down his cheek, don't you?

The servant looks up at the king and says, "Sir have mercy on me. Have mercy and I will pay you everything. Give me a little time." You know what the king did? He did better than just give him a little time. He reached into that ledger book, took hold of the page and ripped it out. He ripped it to shreds, turned to the servant on his knees and said, "I forgive you the debt. You are free and clear. Go in peace."

Can you imagine the state of that servant? Such utter ecstasy. I think the tears just dried up and when he got up, he never touched the carpet again. He must have floated in the air. He didn't have to open the double doors. He simply slipped through and didn't touch a single step on the way down. The man is off to freedom.

We might hope so, but that's not the way the story goes. He apparently touched every step on the way down and when he gets to the bottom, he finds another servant who owes him 100 denarii, twenty bucks. Yet let's not sneeze at twenty bucks because that's three months wages for the average man in the days of Jesus, eighty dollars a year. However, what's twenty bucks in contrast to the 10,000 talents which turns out to be around 10 million dollars in United States currency. This man who had just been forgiven a debt of 10 million dollars is grabbing a man by the throat for twenty bucks. He says, "Pay what you owe."

Notice that Jesus has the fellow servant get on his knees pleading with him as the first man had done before the king. He's saying, "Give me a little time. Have mercy and I'll pay it all back." The man refused. He didn't give him more time. He didn't give him anything. He summoned a police officer and said, this man owes me money. He's not paying me back. Take him to jail. The crowd gathered at the bottom of the stairs didn't like what they saw and heard. They ratted on him. They went to the king and said, "You wouldn't believe what happened at the bottom of the stairs." The king said, "Is that right. Well, the two of us need another conversation."

The king summons the servant back into his presence, away from his abode, across the territory, up the flight of stairs through the double doors into the inner chamber. The king comes in. The servant bows dutifully and the king asks, "Weren't you here just a little while ago?" Yes sir. If I remember correctly, I had the ledger book open to the page on which your name appears and the bottom line of that page said that you owed me 10 million dollars. Is that right? Yes sir. Well, if I remember correctly, I told you I wanted the money now. Yes sir. You got down on your knees and begged for mercy. Do you remember what I did? I ripped the ledger sheet out of the book and told you to go in peace. Now, what's this I hear about what you did when you left this place. By the time you got to the bottom of the stairs, you seized a man who owed you twenty bucks, after I'd forgiven you 10 million. Did you seize someone for twenty bucks and then throw him in jail? Is that right? Yes, that is correct Sir. "Well," said the king, "I have news for you. You know that jail cell where your buddy sits?" Yes sir. Well, that happens to be a suite for two. Now you go join your buddy in that cell. You stay there until you pay me 10 million dollars. As far as we know, he's still there.

Its good to get the humor to that. Its okay to be vindictive in the church for a little while. He got what he had coming to him. That's what we would want to have happen. But the truth is, in terms of its humor, we've only touched the tip of the iceberg because we really haven't had the punch line yet. We are told that it was 10 million dollars and I presume 10 million is a pretty substantial sum for us. But what wasn't mentioned was the sheer fact that nobody could owe 10 million dollars in the days of Jesus. Jesus is telling a joke here.

We are told that the total revenue of a wealthy province like Galilee was only 300 talents. The revenue of the province which contained Idumaea, Judea and Samaria was only 600 talents. If the amount was converted into sixpence, it would take 8,600 people each carrying 60 pounds of sixpence to equal 10,000 talents; a line five miles long. The second servant owed him 100 denarii, one five hundred thousand of his own debt which had been 60 million denarii.

We are told that the entire annual revenue into the Roman coffers all over the globe was approximately 850 thousand dollars. With 850,000 dollars you could pay all the judges, all the road builders, all the armies of the Roman empire, all the entertainers, all the teachers, all the every bodies and still have plenty left over for rubies and emeralds and that sort of thing. Even Herod the Great could not owe 10 million dollars.

Why would Jesus say that someone owed that much? Let's just figure it out. Herod the Great couldn't owe that so when Jesus collects this crowd of people around him and starts telling this story and says, "There was this servant who owed ten million dollars." Do you get it? This servant owed ten million dollars. They choked with laughter. They got the joke.

In the middle of the story Jesus has the servant on his knees, begging for a little time. Do you know how much time he needs? At eighty dollar a year annual wage without interest (if he had to pay interest, he'd really be in difficulty) to pay back ten million dollars would take 125 thousand years. The way Jesus put it was, he owed 10 million. He was in way over his head.

Even with the humor of this story, there seems to be a troubling aspect about it because the hero in the story is the king. The king forgives the servant and ten minutes later takes it back. That's generally not what we've been told about forgiveness. We've been told that if you forgive someone, that's it. You can't say to someone in the morning, I forgive you and then that same afternoon catch up with that person somewhere and say, "I've changed my mind." What's this deal about a king who forgave 10 million dollars and then took the forgiveness back?

No, no this isn't a story about a king who forgave and then took it back. This is a parable, not an allegory. Give Jesus a little poetic license. This is really the story about a servant who was offered the forgiveness of 10 million dollars and did not receive it. He didn't let himself off the hook. How do we know that? We know that because what happened at the bottom of the stairs simply could not have happened had he received the forgiveness. It would have been utterly impossible had he really been forgiven and received it. He wouldn't even notice, if the guy presented himself and said, Hey, I owe you twenty bucks. He'd say, "What's twenty bucks."

You go to an event with a friend, maybe a hockey game, concert or whatever, and when you get there, they realize that they forgot their wallet. So, they say to you, could you lend me the money for a ticket, maybe 10, 15, 25 dollars, whatever it is. I'll drop by later today and pay it back. So, you give them the money. Now it's the next day. Your friend didn't bring the money back. However, its 8:00 o'clock in the morning and you get a phone call from New York, Moscow, Morden, Boissevain, wherever and at the other end of the line is this exuberant voice saying, Congratulations, I'm pleased to announce that you've just been chosen to be the recipient of 25 million dollars. (This time its true). Probably for awhile at least your eyes are just circling in both directions and the only thing that keeps you tied to earth is gravity. Now, is it possible for you to remember as you hang up the phone, your friend who borrowed 10, 15, 25 from you yesterday, failed to bring it back. Are you going to call them on the phone and say, "Don't forget, you owe me money." No, it's impossible.

The man in the parable never let himself off the hook. It could be that instead there was this gnawing sense of guilt and unworthiness which gradually gives way to a spiritual powerlessness. Its not uncommon for the devil to whisper in our ear, see you are a loser. You may as well not even worship. There is no way you are going to make any serious commitment of your life to Jesus the Christ. We tend to forget the words of Colossians 2:13-14 "And you who were dead in your trespasses, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of our debt that stood against us, with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross." Our debt has been nailed to the cross, not held up in front of our face. The weapon of unforgiven sin can no longer be used against us to condemn us. We are forgiven and declared righteous.

Perhaps the man in the story had a hard time with that because he had learnt the lesson that you never take anything from anybody. Everyone's got to pull their own weight. Or, he had heard that anybody can become anything they're inclined to if they work hard enough at it. Just go out there and go for it. It's the American and Canadian way. Or, perhaps he had learnt that its wrong to take candy from a stranger and even worse to take it from a friend. Right? Because then you're in debt to a friend. Never be in debt to a friend. Oh, he learnt that lesson well. He couldn't take a gift like that. We've probably learnt it well as well so much so that if we say to someone, that was a job well done, what do they say. Oh, it was nothing. Anybody could have done it. Isn't that what we say?

Imagine its your birthday. The doorbell rings. You go to the door and look through the screen. There's your best friend with a package in hand. What is it you do not do? You do not look at the package. Its embarrassing, particularly on your birthday. (Can I come in). Pretty soon your friend holds the package so high you can't see the person without seeing the package and you say a silly thing, you say, "Oh, is that for me?" No, I was just carrying it through the neighborhood. Off course its for you. It's your birthday.

With great reluctance and embarrassment, you receive the package, set it on the table and stare at it for a while. Pretty soon you look up and say, "Should I open it?" "No, just put it on the shelf and stare at it for all I care." Off course you open it. You take out the present and say, Oh, its so lovely. Then you say the first decent thing you've said throughout the conversation when you say, "Thank you." But what else do you say at the same time? (Ask the congregation) "You shouldn't have done it." Off course they shouldn't have done it. If they should have it would not be a gift. It would be a payment for services rendered. That's the meaning of gifts.

You know the servant who was summoned across the territory and up the flight of stairs? That could have been you or me. In fact, perhaps it is. Let's just try it out. Let's head across the territory and up those flight of stairs and see. Having been summoned, we go up the flight of stairs and through the double doors, ushered into the inner chamber of the king by an aide. We wait there for the king to arrive. The king comes out with this huge ledger book, plops it on the table, opens it up to find the page where your name or mine is at the top right-hand corner.

The king looks at the bottom line and says to you, "It says here you owe me a lot of money. In fact, is the amount right? It says a million/zillion that you're indebted. Is that correct?" And every last one of us in this room this morning must answer. That is correct sir. Indeed, I am heavily in debt. Even 125 thousand years of effort would not suffice to repay the debt. Do you know what the king does? He takes that sheet (your name or mine) and rips it out of the book. He rips it to shreds, looks at us and says, "I forgive you the debt. You are now free and clear. Go in peace."

Do you know what that means to those of us who can receive the forgiveness? For those of us who can let ourselves off the hook, do you know what that means? It means a lot of things, but I'll tell you the first thing it means. It means nobody's going to have to remind us how to behave. Nobody's going to have to tell us how to act. Nobody's going to have to tell us what to do when we get to the bottom of the stairs. Amen.

Benediction: To those who accept the message come the words. Your debt is forgiven. You are free and clear. Go in peace. The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious unto you. The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give to you God's peace both now and forevermore. Amen.