

Sermon for the Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost: Mathew 18:21-35

The Rev. Brooks Cato

It's no kind of surprise for most of y'all at this point to know that, while I have been Episcopalian for the bulk of my life, I was, initially, a sort of freelance Evangelical. We hopped churches a fair bit but always landed in something Evangelical or Evangelical-like. I have to say, I always feel a little odd claiming too much of an Evangelical background because I was too young to really make sense of things in that context. By the time I started asking questions of my faith, I'd been Episcopalian for a decade, so though I have experienced that world, I see it mostly from the outside. But with that said, the Evangelical world was all around me, and I continued to dip my toe into it. My mother, good, solid churchgoer that she is, went to St. John's Episcopal Church every Sunday with my stepdad and us kids; it was important to her that we all went to church together, even if the Episcopal way of doing things wasn't her cup of tea. No, she was a product of those Evangelical hills, and it showed. For Christmas one year, she told my stepdad he could either get her a KitchenAid mixer or a .22 rifle. A woman needs to be able to provide food for her family, you see; the KitchenAid could provide food in the current climate, but when the apocalypse came, a rifle would serve a gal better. And it would double as protection from marauding gangs of survivalist atheists. To illustrate a little further, when I was growing up, I remember my mom telling us the reason she didn't want any of us kids to get tattoos. It wasn't, as you might imagine, because of the scriptural admonition against them. No, it was because, when the Rapture comes, there are going to be some faithful Christians left behind who will be hunted down by the government and exterminated. A tattoo was a permanent identifier, you see, and it would be easier to go into hiding and avoid being caught if you didn't have one. But Mom's own survivalism and distrust wasn't limited to what would happen on the other side of the end of the world as we know it. Her distrust manifests everyday in ways that are becoming more and more typical of many modern Evangelicals. And at the core of all that is an identity of one who is oppressed.

And it makes sense! From beginning to end, our scriptures are the writings of the underdog. We begin chosen by God but a hardscrabble people. The story takes us through slavery, liberation, and wandering through a desert without a home. When the People of God finally take the Promised Land and thrive, it doesn't feel like power, it feels like long-awaited justice. Then empire after empire comes and knocks us down. As Christians, the story of the oppressed continues. Jesus comes and is a threat to the empire he lives under and the religious authorities of his day. His followers argue for recognition after his death, but they'll also be cast out. Everything that we have written down from that point on is from the perspective of a cast out subset of a conquered people crushed by the Roman Empire. So, it's no wonder that so many Christians identify with the underdog. It's no wonder that so many Christians see themselves as the underdog. It's no wonder.

But doing that forgets a rather important detail in the story. Christianity didn't stay the underdog for long. Only a couple hundred years after those scriptures were written, the Roman Emperor Constantine took a shine to Christianity and made it the religion of the empire, instantly reversing our fortunes. We went from underdog to top dog in a flash. But our scriptures remained the same, and in a weird way, that allowed us to both conquer and play the victim at the same time. Modern Evangelicalism certainly is not the only form of Christianity that still does this. But at least in our current climate, it's the most visible. Evangelicals are both in power and see themselves as persecuted at the same time. Now, none of that should come as a surprise to anyone with eyes to see or ears to hear. We see it all the time. Next time you pick up the paper or click on the news, see how many Christians-are-under-attack headlines you find. (As a side note, there are places in our

world where Christians are, literally, under attack and risk their lives by professing faith in our God. We are not there, and the American appropriation of their suffering is a vile thing.)

I've been thinking a lot about this dual-identity that so many Christians wield today. Christians hold the scepters of power and cry oppression at the same time. But here's the thing. Our scriptures aren't much help because they couldn't anticipate a Constantine. They imagined the coming Kingdom of Heaven, when God would repair all that is broken and set the world under his rightful rule again. They didn't imagine Christians reaching the world through a foreign emperor. They imagined Christians reaching the world because God's love and God's mercy are boundless. They couldn't imagine being in power, that was God's place. Their place was to serve. So, when we zoom in on a passage, like we do every week, all that context matters. It matters that we, as modern Christians, remember who wrote this, what kind of people wrote these things. The story of Joseph, sold into slavery by his own brothers. A convert waiting in a Roman prison for his execution. A fisherman trying to make sense of a new way of living.

And it's that fisherman, the humble Peter, that draws my eye this time around. Because I think he gives us a window into something curious in our scriptures. Last week, Jesus told his disciples how to deal with abuses in the congregation. If you have been wronged, go to the person that wronged you. If they don't listen, take some friends as witnesses. If they still don't listen, tell the whole church. And if they *still* don't listen, then you can let go of trying to fix the darn thing. And today, Peter asks for clarification. Just how many times are we supposed to go through that process? How many times are we supposed to forgive? And Jesus says seventy-seven times! That's quite a lot. And it makes us a very generous people. Actually, we see the act of forgiving held up countless times in scripture.

But there's kind of a beautiful thing that happens in forgiveness that I want to look at for a second. Now hang on tight, this is some wheel-turning stuff early in the morning! When I wrong you, I have violated you in some way, and that violation is me taking some kind of power away from you. When you forgive me for that violation, you actually reclaim some power in the process, like you're somehow above my violation. That's amazing! And it's freeing! But that's not all! If I wrong you, if I have taken that power from you and then come to you asking for forgiveness (assuming the asking is genuine and entails repairing what I made wrong), if I come to you asking for forgiveness, I relinquish that power I took from you, and you can either take it back or leave it hanging there with me left in a vulnerable place. That's your prerogative as the injured party. But either way, the power shifts back to you again. Amazing, right?

But here's the rub. Our scripture puts a massive emphasis on granting forgiveness. But while we do talk about confessing our sins (especially to God), our scripture rarely directs us to ask for forgiveness. So, more often than not, we're directed to grant forgiveness, not ask for it. And it makes sense! Peter can certainly imagine the Roman Empire violating him, in some way, every single day. So when he asks Jesus for clarification, of course he asks how many times he should forgive those who violate him. But I doubt he can imagine a situation where the Empire would ask him for forgiveness or, even more so, a situation where he would ask the Empire to forgive him! It wouldn't make any sense. So he doesn't ask how many times he should ask forgiveness, he asks how often he should forgive. Same goes with the religious context they find themselves in. Peter can't imagine the Pharisees asking him for forgiveness nor can he imagine asking the Pharisees to forgive him. But he can imagine rising above the injuries they cause him and forgiving them for what they do.

And that all makes sense, given his context, and given the context of the vast majority of Christian scriptures. But if we jump ahead, jump ahead to that Constantine and Christianity as the religion of the empire, a problem arises. Now, Christianity is the Empire, and it can violate. It can cause harm and take away agency

and power. But its scriptures still emphasize forgiving -- while asking to be forgiven lays nearly forgotten. Jump again, and here we are, where the problem persists in modern Christianity. We can't see ourselves in the halls of authority (though we are), we see ourselves as oppressed (though we aren't), and we expect to forgive others without needing to ask for their forgiveness (though we do). We are left with an entire group in power that feels persecuted, is willing to forgive those who have wronged them, but is unable to even see how they have wronged others and therefore is unwilling to ask forgiveness.

So, what are we to do, Modern Christians? I started by pointing out some of the faults of the oh-so-easy to target straw man Evangelicals. But the truth is, every Christian uses the same scriptures, and every one of us forgets, from time to time, the implications of our rise to power in history. Absolutely, Jesus and Peter have the right of it. We are a forgiving people, and we must continue to be, difficult though it most certainly can be. But we must also flip the coin over. We are not just a forgiving people. We must be a people that asks for forgiveness, too. We must relinquish some of our power and repair what we have wronged. Any examination of life will turn up something that we've each done that needs fixing. Y'all, we follow a God who is full of mercy and grace. May we, too, have the mercy to forgive others, and the grace to ask to be forgiven.