

## Gift, Fear and Guardian Angels.

As I begin, I want to say thank you to Father Ingalls for inviting me to preach today. I treasure this opportunity. I am so fortunate to have loved a part of the body of Christ for long enough to really watch people grow and become, and now in this moment I am full of joy with the opportunity to speak to these beloved people, in the place where they are being faithful to the Body, even though they are so far from the home of their beginning. You Winnipeg four are honored and loved. And the rest of you whom I do not yet know in body, many of you have been woven into my life in these last years through the stories of my favorite storyteller, and so, already you too, come into to my prayers with joy and gratitude. So, thank you. Now let us seek the triune God together through the Gospel.

At this moment we are on the cusp of time, we are between ordinary time and the Advent of Christ. On the cusp of time one can look forward and backwards and sometimes strange things happen. This week, because of a happy accident between Father Ingalls and myself, we are going to need to look backwards to last week's Gospel reading which you will find printed in your leaflet. Thankfully, I believe looking at last week's Gospel may just be an opportunity to see from a slightly different angle that to which, this week's Gospel for the Reign of Christ invites us.

In this week's Gospel John the Baptist stands on the bank of the Jordan and sees Jesus the Christ, He points and cries out with his whole being "Behold the Lamb!" Two hungry disciples of John follow Jesus through the crowds, seeking, he turns and says to them "What are you looking for? They respond, "Rabbi, where are you staying." Jesus says, "Come and see."

This three phrase dialogue speaks volumes. These disciples speak our longing. They speak that ache that we all know, we humans are always looking, looking for that which will feed the hunger of our hearts. And so, is it any surprise when Jesus turns and asks so poignantly "What are you looking for?" Have you not heard that question in your head or in your heart before? Is it not the question you might expect from the creator who loves, who comes into our world, who desires to know us? What are you really looking for? The question is an invitation, and within that invitation is an infinite answer. Without thinking our heart says, "Where are *you* staying?" Our heart says, "We are looking for the place where you are." And the God man smiles and says, "Come and see."

The disciples follow their hearts, as should we, they live with God in human flesh and they find their understanding of the world rocked to the core. They find that what they were looking for is not at all what they expected. And now we come to last week's gospel. I believe that Matthew 18 and the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant is an incredible illustration of the undoing that comes in our encounter with Christ and our human struggle within it. So, if you could pull out your leaflet let us look at the parable and the conversation which surrounds it.

What strikes me most is the question that arises from the middle of the parable:

Then the lord of that servant was moved with compassion, and loosed him, and forgave him the debt.

**But** the same servant went out, and found one of his fellow servants, which owed him an hundred pence: and he laid hands on him, and took him by the throat, saying, Pay me that thou owest.

This is a remarkable sequence of events and the question that comes to me is: why does the forgiveness of a great debt, why does sudden freedom, seem to cause the servant to go out and find someone who is indebted to him, to strangle him, and make him pay? There is no time that passes between the gift and the seeking of one to strangle and make pay. It is immediate and this makes it very striking. What is Jesus trying to say through the strong causal link he makes in this story?

In order to discern the meaning let's go back to the beginning of Chapter 18 of Matthew.

It begins with the disciples wondering how to become the greatest in the kingdom of heaven and Christ saying that the greatest in the kingdom must become like a child. It continues with a warning against putting a stumbling block in front of these little ones and the seriousness of this wrong is reinforced with some very extreme words of consequence. Jesus keeps on going, talking about the importance of these little sacred beings saying.

Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven.

Now let's stop and rest here, is this not one of the beautiful truths of scripture? It is just dropped here in the midst of some very hard teachings. Jesus says that: Little ones have angels that are theirs who continually see the face of Christ's father in heaven! Did you know that this one small sentence is the ground of the great tradition of guardian angels? Let us just glory in that idea for a moment, we were all little ones once, in fact in the scheme of things, we are all still very little and thus we, each one of us, have an angel who can continually see the face of God. We will return to these angels, but for now you might perhaps want to ponder your angel and open to the presence of your angel as you continue to listen. If this statement of Christ's is true, the room is thick with angels, the world is saturated with them. Ponder this for a moment and don't worry if you stop listening and just pay attention to your angel, it is likely an excellent use of your time.

This gorgeous moment is followed by the story of the Lost Sheep, where Jesus tells us that the shepherd will go looking for anyone that is lost and find her and bring her home.

Then we move to the issue of conflict and wrongs done to us. Jesus is practical here laying down parameters for how to walk through difficult issues. He isn't unrealistic, if conflict cannot be resolved he says "If the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector." The only complication in this saying is that Jesus spends all his time with tax-collectors and the like.

He then sets the stage for the parable given to us today by turning to the issue of binding and loosing.

I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.'

Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven...

What does that mean? Well let's find out for it is these words that seem to be connected to Peter's question which begins our gospel for today.

'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' And Jesus says to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.' Now just a note, this seventy-seven times is often recorded as seventy times seven and its purpose is representative, it is symbolic of an unlimited amount.

Jesus is asking for unlimited forgiveness from Peter and then Jesus tells the parable about the servant who owes an impossible amount, who asks for patience and who is given, not patience, but rather, the mercy of utter freedom from debt. Then this free man reacts to this freedom by immediately going out, finding, strangling and enslaving one indebted to him for a pittance.

And thus we return to our question. Why does he do this? Let us not assume that this man is pathological and cruel, or even particularly bad because this is in an unhelpful assumption. It closes the parable too quickly and we are not implicated. The point of all parables is that we are implicated. So, how are we implicated? Why does he react this way, why might we react this way?

I want to contend that he reacts this way out of fear, the same fear that led the disciples to start this conversation with Jesus with a question about who is the greatest, and the same fear that Peter feels when he asks his question about the limits of forgiveness. What is the fear?

The debt owed by the debtor is again representative of an impossible amount, it could not be earned by a laborer in several lifetimes. Thus, it doesn't make a lot of sense to think of the debtor as having accrued this debt in particular. This is not a parable about a great sinner. It may not

even be a parable about sin, or at least it is not only about sin. Rather I believe it is a parable about the human condition. Our *whole existence is a gift* and our only hope in the face of the evils of history is to receive the gift of forgiveness. All is gift, a gift we cannot pay back. It is a gift with no strings to hold onto. The economy of gift is an atmosphere without all the familiar of gravity of status, and the balancing of debts. In the truth of God, we are free, every moment given and forgiven, and we are floating in this substance of gift. Oh, it feels strange against our fallen human skin. So strange, that when we think about it, we might begin to flail about in fear.

In this water of freedom, in this lack of economy, which is the economy of gift, we don't know where we stand, we don't know what to do, we are not allowed our pride, and we have no claim on our freedom because we didn't earn it. We are afraid and thus we might react like the debtor in an attempt to restore the order of things, and to remake the world into something familiar and secure. We all desire security.

Many human horrors are rooted in this desire to maintain this economy of ego, this economy of debt and repayment. An Eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. We can even see how the destruction of our planet is based in this economy; on a belief that we humans have a right to dominate and that the whole earth owes us something. In this time of the Anthropocene, we live with the illusion that that we are the highest, the centre, and thus that if we are smart enough to get it, we should have it. In this thinking we have come to great grief and even in our attempts to right wrongs we create economies of debt and retribution; we attempt to buy ourselves out of what we have created with 'environmental credits.' Since Adam and Eve we have been afraid, we have wanted to know where we stand, what to do, we want to know how to discern who is wrong and who is right, who is the greatest and what the limits of forgiveness are. And the great sorrow is that when we continue to act from this fear we stay in the prison of our own making and keep everyone else there too. We stay right beside the debtor who was forgiven his debt but was too afraid to swim in this new freedom of mercy. The parable may not be describing a hell after death, it may be describing what happens when we stay bound in this economy making hell on earth.

But this parable is the Gospel; good news, therefore, the point of the parable cannot be that we are in a doomed cycle despite creation and grace. No, I believe the parable is partially intended to help the disciples feel the proper problem deeply. Part of transformation is to understand the actual problem. The disciples think that to being the greatest and keeping moral order which knows the limits of forgiveness is the way to the kingdom of heaven, but Jesus is trying to help them see that to enter the kingdom of heaven we must receive life as gift; forgiveness as gift. We must become as open as a little child. Yes, to receive this gift is like a camel going through the eye of a needle but as Jesus says in response to that impossibility, "Nothing is impossible for God."

Jesus Christ refused the economy into which we are enslaved and lived freely without fear, and this is the hope. Jesus Christ the God human knows the gravity of the human eye for an eye and

tooth for a tooth and refuses it. He comes into our fallen economy and within it he practices compassion grounded in love. Though he is God, he receives his human life from his father as gift and makes no claim on this gift, he doesn't claim it as his property, or his right, he makes no claim on any other human either, and exploits no one. He gives, he receives the fullness of humanity, and he forgives all that is broken within it. He swims in the water of the economy of love, his body knows how to float in this water of grace. And because he is all God and all human and because he goes unto death for us, all the way to the limits of everything, the limits of every hurt and wrong perpetrated in history, he makes his body a boat for all of us, a womb where we are safe in these strange waters of gift and forgiveness. As Julian of Norwich says so beautifully "Our Saviour is our very mother in whom we be endlessly borne, and never shall come out of him." A way is made, the frightening freedom has been endured and shown for what it is, love, enough love to endure and transform all the repetition of the dreadful economy for all time.

But, you say, "Despite this truth our world still seems so caught in this prison, Evil is rampant, and we feel so caught in this prison of fear." Yes, and this is a very deep sorrow. But here our friend and teacher Charles Williams comes to our aid, for he teaches that the work of the church is to have, what he calls, paradisaic knowledge; we are called to know what **is** while we live in what **seems to be**. Our job is to know the evils of this world as evil but never to be satisfied with the limitations of that knowledge, rather we must see the world within the love which has loved these evils, every one, and has the power to transform every iota of their existence into the Good. To be in the church is to practice double sight. It is to swim enclosed in Christ while living in the world.

Charles Williams found this work of the church agonizing and frightening and almost impossible, but this paradox is why we are all here sitting here today. This wild agonizing freedom is what we are seeking. We are baptized into Christ and we eat Christ's body and just so we participate in the form of God's existence; we know the buoyancy of floating. We don't own it; we cannot claim it and there is nothing to take pride in, but we can be in this body and being in it we can feel it reach in the love that gives and forgives. And sometimes at the bottom of our being we know that it looses bonds on earth so that they can be loosed in heaven. This is what faith is, to learn to trust that the water of love can hold up the universe.

To be frightened within this life is okay. Because Jesus's whole point is that we are not asked to be heroes we are asked to be little ones! So then, let us return to the angels that are assigned to the little ones: From what you know of scripture can you call to mind the most common words angels say to their human friends whenever they speak to them? I believe the most common greeting is 'Be not afraid.'

So, I ask you, in all the fear and in all the times you forget who you are and try to be the greatest, please know that there is a beautiful being of light beside you whispering to just you, saying in gentle firm tones "Be not afraid." And know, that before Jesus tells a parable which rebukes his

disciples for being caught in the unreal economy which binds the world in unfreedom, he reminds them and us that we have angels looking at the face of God. These angels they know the world only as it *is*, not as it *seems to be* and they are *our* angels, sent to hold onto us when we cannot hold on. And so, I ask you, when you are afraid or unfree, which may be all the time if you are wired at all like I am, listen to the silence just beyond you, it is your friend speaking courage to you saying, "Keep swimming, be not afraid."

The beautiful thing about the Church year is that it cycles us again and again through childhood to adulthood in faith. In Matthew 18 Jesus is giving his disciples the hard word, the adult word. You must know the world as it is with all the evils in it and you must become like a child and see and receive the truth of its ultimate goodness through my body, through my life given for you on the cross. But now that we have heard that hard word it is time to let go and follow our hearts like children, and run after Jesus in the beauty and glow of advent, all the way to the feast of Christmas. As children we are invited frolic with our angels and watch them sing the Gloria amongst the stars. Don't worry, Jesus will always turn as we chase him through whatever life gives and ask "What are you looking for?" And don't worry you will answer, Rabbi where are you staying? And he will say come and see. And it will begin again.