

The Rev. Dean Lindsey

September 14, 2008

Debt Forgiven

Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Romans 14:7-12; Matthew 18:21-35

About thirty years ago, a Washington journalist named Judith Martin began writing a newspaper column called Miss Manners. As a student at the time, I figured that her column had something to do with how to place the silverware on a dinner table or which arm the man extends when escorting a lady to a costume ball. I had no interest in reading about that. In fact, I was surprised that anyone wanted to read about manners, including a young woman I was dating at the time. She loved Miss Manners, and since she was such a big fan, that meant I had (at least) to read or listen to quotes from her advice column.

I discovered that Miss Manners is not so much concerned with nit-picking over the rules of proper society as she is with encouraging us to be thoughtful and civil in our interactions with one another. The initial and enduring popularity of Miss Manners suggests that many of us realize that we've got some problems which need to be addressed. Manners are generally in a pretty sorry state in our society. And we've all been on the receiving end of thoughtless behavior.

As a starting point for learning about the need to be polite and well-mannered to others, it may be helpful for us to think about times when we have been mistreated. What went wrong? How can we refrain from treating others in ways that we find so distasteful?

It is this kind of teaching that finds a prominent place in the lessons that Jesus shares with his disciples. He wants them to get along with each other. He wants us to get along together, too, so he offers some basic rules to guide us. In a few places he illustrates this ethic by pointing to a negative example: the behavior of someone we do not want to follow.

That is certainly the case in a story we often refer to as the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant. It's a wild tale, full of fantastic exaggerations. It would have made Jesus' first hearers laugh out loud. "A king sought to settle accounts with his servants. One owed him 10,000 talents." Now, there is not much humor in this, unless you know how much a talent is worth. Do any of you know?

A talent was an amount of silver equal to fifteen years wages for an average worker. In order to translate the amount Jesus describes into modern dollars, I multiplied out the annual median salary for an American worker times 15 times 10,000. I came out with a figure close to \$5 billion.

Just to put this into a modern context, Jesus could have told the story this way. “Bill Gates was looking over the books one day to see who owed him some money. He noticed that one of his employees owed him \$5 billion dollars.” What a howler. He just happened to notice? And what was he lending out that much money for?

Then, there’s the next howler. The king plans to sell this slave and all of his possessions. Well, that ought to erase about 1/50 thousandth of the debt! Again, the first hearers would have let out a laugh.

The next howler. The servant promises to pay back his debt! How can a lowly servant pay back a debt of \$5 billion dollars? But, that is not even necessary. The king wipes out the debt. What a relief.

But, then the parable turns serious. No more laughing. The servant goes out and demands a completely insignificant debt owed to him by someone else be paid immediately, or else! He shows no mercy. That makes everyone angry: the other servants, the king himself, the audience to which Jesus speaks. It should make us angry, too. How can anyone behave that poorly, especially after receiving so much? It’s a question we need to be willing to ask of ourselves.

Surely, God has treated us graciously. So, how are we treating each other? With mutual respect or with selfishness? With loving kindness or with dismissiveness? With understanding or with pettiness? With forgiveness or by holding on tightly to small grudges?

There may genuinely be times when we don’t know how to act. Our instincts don’t help us, and the training is not in place. That is why Miss Manners writes her column. I came across an interview she once had with a reporter in which she was trying to explain her mission.

“You can deny all you want that there is a need for etiquette, and a lot of people do. But if you behave in a way that offends the people you’re trying to deal with, they will stop dealing with you...There are plenty of people who say, ‘We don’t care about

etiquette, but we can't stand the way so-and-so behaves, and we don't want him around! Etiquette doesn't have the great sanctions that the law has. But the main sanction we do have is in not dealing with these people and isolating them because their behavior is unbearable."

Jesus is not laying down the law for us, but he does lay out principles which express God's graciousness in the way we treat one another.

His message is an urgent one for us, because there are so few useful models for us in the culture at large. We should be taking a different set of behaviors with us into the world. However, too often, we take the practices of the world and bring them with us to the church.

I've got to say that in my years of ministry, there have been more than a few times when I've had to shake my head in wonder: the way this person is acting, I sure hope they didn't learn that in church! Twisting someone's word to score points in an argument; trying to win at any cost; in a dispute with someone else, choosing to talk behind their back rather than trying to address the problem one-on-one; expressing false outrage over some small word misspoken. That may be how people act in your workplace. That may be how people act in your school. That is how people act on the political stage. That cannot be and that will not be the way we act in the church.

Not only is it mean spirited, it is a renunciation of the gospel and a complete turn-off for anyone who seeks to experience the gospel through us. No one would want to attend a church where people are acting like a surly clerk in a department store or a salesperson who's unloaded some bad goods on you, the unsuspecting customer, and now refuses to return your phone call, or that person behind you in traffic who keeps honking at you because you're moving slow because the person in front of you is moving even slower. We get mistreated a lot out there. That's why it's all the more important to treat people differently in here. So that they will know that the gospel makes a difference, too.

Someone recently told me about a deep unhappiness in her family. She has a cousin named Janet who is a bit older than herself. Janet has always been out of step with the politics of the rest of the family. But, that never mattered. They always had a great time together. Family reunions were always joy-filled occasions. They would talk and

laugh on all sorts of topics but knew to stay off the subject of politics. Until the last few years.

Janet, you see, became completely enamored with right-wing talk radio. She started slipping little comments into conversations that others found off-putting, even a bit aggressive. There's been some tension brewing that came to a head last month. My friend's daughter will soon be married, and all of the family was gathered for a wedding shower. The bride-to-be was describing her enthusiasm for the candidacy of Barack Obama. Not a long disputation, just a few comments about what was encouraging to her. Cousin Janet couldn't let it lie. She stood up in the middle of the gathering, face red, veins bulging in her neck, and shouted, "If that's who you're going to vote for, then I'm not coming to the wedding." And with that she stormed out of the room.

What would Miss Manners say? What would Jesus say?

Cousin Janet placed politics over family. Her certainty about her own position over the needs of others. Like the unforgiving servant, she disdained the relationship in favor of being right. Unlike the king, she could not show mercy, but the lasting effect of it all will be to cut herself off from a large group of people who genuinely care for her.

Place the relationships first: that is what Jesus teaches. In particular, make those relationships within the family of faith the highest priority. That is where the gospel begins. Never should it be the place where the gospel ends.

Amen.