15 Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 9.17.23; Proper 19A

Matthew 18:21-35
Then Peter came and said to him, "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." (329)

It's not a new book but for a bunch of reasons I've been revisiting its insights. When it came out, in 2019, these were covered in all the smart magazine outlets: *The New Yorker, The Atlantic Monthly.* The book is *The Dream Hoarders: How the American Upper Middle Class is Leaving Everyone Else in the Dust, Why That Is a Problem, and What to Do About It.* It's by Richard V. Reeves, a book I must admit I haven't read.

Until I do, Annie Lowry in *The Atlantic* summed it up well: "The book traces the way that the upper-middle class has pulled away from the middle class and the poor on five dimensions: income and wealth, educational attainment, family structure, geography, and health and longevity."

It's not hard to detect economic injustice afoot in our society. Though a well-researched book to fill in the picture is most welcome, it isn't hard to sense, if you ask me. While the screen writers strike, and the screen actors join them; while the auto workers strike, demanding a 40 percent increase in wages to match the 40 percent percent rise their CEOs have enjoyed in salary in recent years: it's not difficult to detect economic unfairness.

It's actually hard *not* to notice, if you ask me. Tobias, my son who was a builder this summer, working with skilled laborers of the most excellent caliber. I imagine most of them would

say the same—working in one case on a $4 million dollar home and facing complaints from the home-owner that labor costs seem higher than they need to be.

And people like Mr. Reeves are making the case that the real story isn't regarding the so-called one percent, and not even with the 0.1 percent, but the earning segment of our society that has managed the trick of denying itself: the so-called upper middle class, the nine percent between the one percent of the top and the 90 percent that is everybody else.

It's nice, perhaps, to think of the masses standing together—solidarity!—facing off the 1 percent. "We are the 99 percent!" went the rallying cry following the appearance on the scene of Occupy Wall Street. Richard Reeves says, no, actually those upper nine percent are worthy of note as well, more than worthy of note.

And the note is, sadly, not about solidarity.

Here's Annie Lowry again: "The top 20 percent of earners might not have seen the kinds of income gains made by the top one percent and America's billionaires. Still, their wage and investment increases have proven sizable. They dominate the country's top colleges, sequester themselves in wealthy neighborhoods with excellent public schools and public services, and enjoy healthy bodies and long lives.

"They then pass those advantages onto their children… parents [essentially] placing a 'glass floor' under their kids. They ensure they grow up in nice zip codes, provide social connections that make a difference when entering the labor force, help with internships, aid with tuition and home-buying, and schmooze with college admissions officers. All the while, they support policies and practices that protect their economic position and prevent poorer kids from climbing the income ladder: legacy admissions, the preferential tax treatment of investment income, 529 college savings plans, exclusionary zoning, occupational licensing, and restrictions on the immigration of white-collar professionals."

That was Annie Lowry. Now, in a longer, and frankly snarkier, article, also in *The Atlantic Monthly,* Matthew Stewart wrote of this class of people. The article's headline: "The 9.9 Percent is the New American Aristocracy." And just below: "The class divide is already toxic, and is fast becoming unbridgeable. You're probably part of the problem," addressing the average *Atlantic* reader.

He admits that he is part of the problem, too, using the term "we" whenever speaking of this group, for he is very clear that he is a member. This he also calls the meritocratic class, so

merit-worthy have they become, collecting accreditation, accolade, and accomplishment with every passing day.

He writes, "The meritocratic class has mastered the old trick of consolidating wealth and passing privilege along at the expense of other people's children. We are not innocent bystanders to the growing concentration of wealth in our time. We are the principal accomplices in a process that is solely strangling the economy, destabilizing American politics, and eroding democracy."

I would add here, it's emptying out our mainline churches, too, for the mainline church is very much, for better or for worse, a classic middle-class enterprise. It depends upon a stable society with a settled population in it for the long haul. It relies on its people being able to strike a good work-life balance, and encourages and benefits from a strong sense of civic engagement and neighborly responsibility that is voluntary and faithful, slow and steady.

Back to Mr. Stewart: "So what kind of characters are we, the 9.9 percent? We are mostly not like those flamboyant political manipulators from the 0.1 percent. We're a well-behaved, flannel-suited crowd of lawyers, doctors, dentists, mid-level investment bankers, M.B.A.s with opaque job titles, and assorted other professionals—the kind of people you might invite to dinner. In fact, we're so self-effacing we deny our own existence. We keep insisting we're 'middle class.'"

Mr. Stewart isn't helping in that effort to hide. Neither is Ms. Lowry, nor Mr. Reeves. It might be a matter of justice for these. It also might be a more practical matter. As Mr. Stewart writes: "Our delusions of merit now prevent us from recognizing the nature of the problem our emergence as a class represents. We tend to think that the victims of our success are just the people excluded from the club [-who, let's face it, don't really merit inclusion, amiright?]. But history shows quite clearly that, in the kind of game we're playing, everybody loses badly in the end."

Of course, there's little reason to think the parable Jesus tells here in the 18th chapter of the gospel of Matthew is about the emergence of the 9.9 percent—that mid-level slave who managed to get himself inconceivably indebted to the 0.1 percent of his world. (What he owed is about $3.5 billion in today's "wages.") There's little reason to think Jesus was winking at this new socio-economic class. Some people read scripture for such magical foretelling of current events, but I don't. I think scripture's evergreen relevance is more subtle than that. That said, the actions of the one indebted who was also debtor do seem very "9 percent" to me.

As you might remember from last week, the 18th chapter of this gospel is referred to as the Community Discourse. This has Jesus speaking of this thing he seems intent on establishing: the church. Not every gospel depiction of Jesus imagines such an intention on his part. Neither Mark,

nor Luke, nor John have Jesus gathering such an intentional body as this, a discrete gathering that is to be recognized both from within and beyond. That there is to be in the world such a thing as this, the church, a public witness that members know themselves to be members of and outsiders know themselves to be welcome to join: that's alone to be found in Matthew.

For better or for worse. For I know all the arguments against any such institution in the world. Institutions, even ones founded to be a "good cause:" not long after you found one, you become as interested in maintaining the institution as getting to the point of what the institution was formed to do. Schools established to educate the populace seem destined to become as administrative as educative. Museums built to give wide access to the public, access to art or to science or to human history, become more known for their galas to raise funds than for their exhibits for which said funds are raised. The church, built up to resemble Jesus, how he lived and even how he died, skids often into resembling an administrative state, with bean-counters, spin doctors, and a human resources department just trying to get in front of the latest scandal.

So maybe institutionalizing this isn't such a great move…?

Maybe Jesus' intent on forming the church, or at least Matthew's commitment to Jesus as one intent on forming the church: maybe this is a misstep early in the journey of the "Jesus people" through history. Maybe this just gummed up the works of simply *doing* the gospel, simply living love and practicing mercy and working for justice and insisting upon truth and witnessing to this universal God who is at once revealed and concealed, hidden and manifest, mysterious and plain as day.

On the other hand, this way in the world, this "Jesus way," was counter-cultural, and was therefore something that needed cultivation. The way a garden needs cultivation, the stuff of following Jesus is very much the stuff of the world, but it must be put together in ways that mere nature wouldn't necessarily do it. It must be cultivated; it must be taught. To prefer the sort of love that might cost a person dearly: this must be cultivated. To prefer the sort of life that isn't about competition with the promise of really winning but is rather about cooperation where everyone wins though you, individually, might just as often yield if not flat-out lose: this must be nurtured. If you want a society that deals in grace akin to the grace that God pours forth, it means the strongest, the smartest, the cleverest, the most aggressive, the best looking, the tallest, the ones who've longest had access to power and resources, won't always get all the goodies. No, more often, they'll give instead of just get. And this requires cultivation, which itself requires a culture, an environment intentionally seeking such a way: the church.

Which brings with it a certain visibility, making it possible for those seeking to live together with others in such a way to find such a people, such a gathering. The church as intentionally gathered and purposefully built up, eventually indeed with actual buildings, makes it so people can find us. They don't need already to be in the know. They don't need already to be connected with those already connected. They certainly don't need to have been lucky enough to be invited. No, they can look for one of our buildings, which, different though they may be from one to the next, all bear some resemblance to a common form—which everyone sort of knows belongs to them as well. Or at least they *should* know; we should make it so they do know. This belongs to you as well. This belongs to any and all.

Which isn't always the case, that people know this. For churches can cast an exclusionary tone as well. Many are the people who wouldn't dare come through any of our doors—if indeed they can figure out which of our typically many doors to come through (and seldom the front and most obvious one) and those doors are in proper working order. Assuming they'll be unwelcome, assuming they'll be judged or excluded or ignored, assuming our belief system is more precious to us than our practice of lovingkindness, they're not wrong. Many churches *do* prize their beliefs over their practice. Many other churches have forgotten simply how to *do* hospitality. You say hello. You disclose your name. You ask if there's anything the newcomer needs to feel welcome and safe and open to an encounter with the Holy.

The problems of the intentional, institutional church abound.

But Matthew's Jesus would go for it anyway.

This parable is the third of three sections of the Community Discourse. The point of it is to press upon the people the power of forgiveness, the *imperative* of forgiveness. The point is to impress upon the hearer that those who are forgiven should also forgive.

One scholar of this text, Anna Case-Winters, recognizes you don't have to strain hard to get the point of the parable. She explains the obvious: "Jesus tells a parable to illustrate the absurdity of one who has been forgiven so much ($3.5 billion dollars!) failing to forgive in turn." Absurd, she calls it! Just so, "the hearer's likely response is outrage: 'That's just wrong!'" And she concludes, "It is only possible to be unforgiving if one is either forgetful or ungrateful. Awareness of the grace we have received allows us to be gracious [in kind] …"

Awareness. "Wake up."

Well, it all makes you suspect there's some benefit in unawareness, in staying asleep. A plausible deniability that we have received and therefore there is a press upon us in kind to give. A

plausible belief in the invisible hand of the market, that which doles our desserts utterly justly, that which doles out opportunity and access to resources in direct measure to the merit of the one so to receive. Oh, to be free of the throb and prick and stab of knowing that's really, really not how this all works! Not anymore. If ever it did, (and it didn't, by the way, as the benefits of middle class living never really came home for Black Americans, to name one major group); but if ever it (and, again, it didn't), it really doesn't anymore.

We've got to *do* something. We've got to cultivate a different way. I grew up in the middle class. I *miss* it as a viable option. I hate that the picture of success has changed so radically even over the fifty years of my lifetime, and that the punishment for misfortune is so very punishing.

This, while misfortune is coming for us all. We are *all* going to have hardship befall us. The headline is that most American households are one major illness or accident away from financial ruin. But we are creatures who get sick, who suffer accident. That happens commonly. That will happen in every household. We will get sick or fall vulnerable, and we will die, and we shouldn't be economically and socially punished for this being so. There should be forgiveness woven into the system. There should mercy in the warp and weft of it all.

Which gets us to the final portion of Mr. Reeves book—the *...and What To Do About It*. Because *I* don't know how to fix it. One of the characteristics of the byzantine system that discretely, self-denyingly delivers benefit to those who least need it is that it's byzantine and you need to be something of a wizard to figure out how to undo it, which cable or cord to cut so the whole system slows down for a minute and doesn't blow up in our faces. And I'm not a wizard like that.

But I can be a bit of conscience.

We can be a bit of conscience.

Jesus formed the church, for better or for worse. So here we are, continuing to cultivate fealty to Jesus, an illiterate, itinerant, dead-end in the world. Yes, here we are, continuing to nurture this strange fealty to a crucified Lord, who, turns out, is a most potent witness against meritocracy, for if there was ever anyone who *didn't* merit what he got in the world, indeed didn't merit crucifixion, it was the one who said, "Blessed are the poor, blessed are the meek," the one who worked miracles because so strong was his conviction that you don't need to put up with suffering, there's nothing noble in tolerating the cruelty of the world, and there's nothing praise-worthy in the underclass accepting their mean estate.

We can do better.

We can do good.

That said, we perhaps none of us quite know how to get our society out of the vicious cycles it's gotten into. But there's benefit in recognizing what's wrong. There's benefit in waking up from our slumber and shaking off the comforts of sleep. We have received. Some of us have received greatly. There is joy in occupying a position to give—and that joy can be ours.

Thanks be to God.