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Sermon transcript

St Philip Oak Bay

9.30 am Eucharist 17 September 2023

Fr Allen Doerksen

Reference: [Exodus 14:19-31 Matthew 18:21-35](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Exodus+14%3A19-31%3B+++Matthew+18%3A21-35&version=NRSVA)

Sermon: starts 34:17

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3r1ReifmbS0>

Again it's really, really good to be with you today. It's great to see Jordie and Habbous here - now you guys get to go through that process where everyone asks you the same question: how was it, what's going on? Anyway, I'm sure the Lord will teach you patience through that! it's good to see you.

As a few of you might know, when Denise and I were younger we were pastors in a movement of churches called the Vineyard [35:00], the movement of Evangelical charismatic churches that had, through its leaders, quite a large influence on the Anglican Church in England - for those of you that have been through the Alpha Course, you’ll know of Holy Trinity Brompton [London, UK] ,there was a direct relationship there - and on a select group of churches here in Canada. Strangely enough, after we became Anglican priests we've ended up serving in several of those parishes: Saint Matthew in Abbotsford, and Denise as an intentional interim at St David's, Tsawwassen - and now here I am serving at another of those parishes affected by the theology and experience of Vineyard Church.

Of course all of those parishes have moved on from that wild and woolly time [36:00], nigh 40 years ago now - crazy how time flies by - but usually with some aspect of the culture or practice of that time baked in to present practice. In our case, I'm guessing it's the fact that we never come on time to this service, that we feel free to drift in with our coffee, and the five songs right before the service - that's all part of the Vineyard shtick, for you guys that never experienced it, so it's like coming home for me when I'm in this service. Actually the Anglican church and all of its wild and woolliness is now home, but you get the picture.

So I shared that bit of personal /parish history free of charge, I know it's extremely generous of me [37:00,] but really as a setup for the fact that once while I was a young pastor in that movement, someone came up to me with a personal prophecy. Those are the kinds of things that happen in charismatic churches. The person said, “You're good at navigating the large rocks and boulders along the way. What you have to be careful about is that you don't trip up because of the sand in your shoes.” Now that wasn't so much a prophecy as an insight into my character, what we would call in the biz a “word of knowledge”, and it was actually a lot more elegant than some of the stuff that people shared with each other under the guise of, “hey I've got a word of God for you.” A big part of my work as a pastor was cleaning up some of those words [38:00] that came to people but in this case and very importantly it resonated with me as very true.

I could quite easily, at that time, tackle large challenges, but get extremely irritated if the toast burned. In relationships I could seemingly forgive big offenses, stay up half the night counseling somebody, but then if somebody didn't show up on time for whatever, I'd hold a grudge. Minor slight. These then built into resentments which led to mistrust and a lack of connection. This “word of knowledge”, this actually very important insight into my character, was working away at me [39:00] in my 20s and 30s as I gradually moved away from the Vineyard and joined the Anglican Church. And now after preaching through the lectionary cycle years one to three, I think it's about six and a half times, I've come to see that this section of Matthew was giving people like me a road map.

Peter, who I've always related to in his kind of cantankerous nature, his “speak first, think later” kind of approach to things, has been stewing about what Jesus has just said about going to each other when you've hurt one another, or somebody has hurt another person .And it's not sitting well with him, for he sees where this is going: Jesus is kind of redefining in real time [40:00] what his vision and ministry is really all about, what his call from God is actually all about. And Peter isn't liking what he's hearing. For people like Peter, for many young pastors whom I've known, who want to confront boulders and climb great mountains, who want to do heroic things, like kill all the Romans and help enthrone Jesus as the king of Israel, what Jesus is saying here is like throwing a bucket of cold water in the face. This is not what Peter signed up for, or thought he was getting involved in, and yet here it is: this patient everydayness of dealing with each other and the way we are with each other. This is actually the deep, [41:00] radical,

counter-cultural expression of the kingdom of God. And so Peter is trying to sweep what he imagines is a side issue out of the way, and he does it by by saying, “Well then, how often should I forgive, Lord? should it be as many as seven times? Wow, look at me, I'm being very generous in saying that! And now let's just get back to what's the main and the plain, this business of getting you to be the king of Israel.”

But Jesus responds with this crazy number: 77. in the text we read today some versions have 70 times 7, 490. And then the story: the story which is truly outrageous, which is saying in effect, no [42:00], this is what my kingdom is actually like; this is what my kingship is, and if you don't get this about me, you won't be understanding what it means for me for me to be the Messiah anyway, and you'll sure never understand what it means to live as my follower. That's why Jesus has to tell the story the way he does, so over the top, so disturbingly over the top. He's trying to help Peter and people like me understand the completely upside-down nature of his purpose and vision, and so, as it stands, it's a parable, it's not metaphysics.

This isn't the way God is as God, but rather it's a story meant to draw out [43:00] what happens to our souls when we try to live heroically but fail to be generous with forgiveness in our day-to-day existence. The servant has been forgiven a lifetime and more of debt, which is of course a clue to us that this story is hyperbole to the max - how does a slave accumulate that kind of debt? Doesn't make much sense. And yet when confronted with this prosaic everydayness of forgiving his fellow slave the equivalent of chump change, he's completely tripped up. He's unable to do it. If this sounds familiar, you're not wrong. I've come to understand that the “word of knowledge”, this revelatory Insight that was given to me all those years ago [44:01] , wasn't really unique to me, but simply an insight into something at the heart of the human condition. A person heroically serves in the military, then loses his family because he can't live with them in peace and acceptance. A person stares down cancer stoically and without complaining, and then loses her marriage because her parents’ faults and shortcomings cause her to complain endlessly. In both those cases there's probably extenuating circumstances involving something like trauma, but I could have shared stories of judges, CEOs, Altar Guild members, parish council members and priests whose stories are very similar. A parish takes on a large [45:00] ministry of feeding the poor, or University students, only to lose its way over arcane points of doctrine, or because they can't agree on whether to serve Fair Trade coffee or

the Costco brand.

I kid you not: the tragedy of these examples, all of which happened in parishes I've had the privilege of serving in, is illustrative of what happens when we like Pharaoh, or this servant in Jesus's parable, harden our hearts to the truth that is right in front of us. Pharaoh had every reason to know, after all the plagues, after all the firstborn sons in the land have perished tragically, and now in today's story, seeing the unnaturally pushed back water, he had every reason in the world to see what was right [46:00] in front of him, and not plunge in with his army into the abyss. Creation was literally yelling at him to be careful. And so what the Israelites experienced as salvation, as rescue from slavery, and so experienced as dry ground, Pharaoh experienced as muck and mire. Ironically, he was the one enslaved, by his failure to live with others in a way that was forgiving and integrative, rather seeking to dominate and oppress with violence, and so he came in turn to destruction.

What Peter is learning, what we learn as we live with others – indeed, live with ourselves - over any length of time, is that forgiveness reconciliation [47:00] isn't a nice side thing not one of those things we can set aside if we don't like its demands, not like a Christmas present we receive from a grandparent from afar and we think, “Oh how nice of them to do this for me; I don't really like that, I'll just set it aside.” Rather, forgiveness is more like the air in your lungs: there's only room for more if you breathe it out, or breathe out the last breath you received. If you fail to do so, you won't be able to take any more air in. So we don't need to just breathe seven times. Peter wasn't being magnanimous at all. We don't even need to just pray, or breathe in forgiveness, 77 times or 490 times, but as a way of life. It's in that sense, of course [48:00], that we need to read the last verse, about your heavenly Father doing to you if you don't forgive from your heart. Without finding a way to live in forgiveness, to deal with the accretion of daily grudges and resentments that pile up in our souls, we will find ourselves unable to receive the life, the oxygen, of God, and find ourselves choking in some self-made jail. Church is the place and the people with whom we have the opportunity to shake the sand out of our shoes: a place and a people with whom we learn to breathe in and out the clean air of forgiveness, and so find ourselves walking on dry ground in the midst [49:00] of a dangerous world. I hope that's a word of knowledge for all of us here today. Amen.