**Wait… Jesus Said What??
First Baptist Church of Albemarle
March 18, 2018**

For thousands of years, the Jewish people have compared Scripture to a multi-sided diamond. They understand reading Scripture as similar to holding a beautiful diamond up to the light and slowly turning it in order to see the deeper beauty and detail of the many facets. Just like the ancient Hebrew people, we believe the Bible to have life and breath and meaning and mystery. We look to the Holy Spirit to illuminate God’s Word for us when we open the Bible, and that is my prayer for our time here today.

I’ve been a Christian for only a decade or so, but I know that over the last ten years of my life, I have read the same Bible verse or story at different times and gotten completely different things from it. I’m sure my older *(or, more mature)* brothers and sisters in Christ can attest to this spiritual truth even more so than I can. There are many ways of reading our text for today; one way of reading it is as an allegory: a symbolic representation with the king being God and Christians being the wicked servant. For the next 15 or so minutes, I want to take that view, and put it to the side – we’re going to turn the diamond and see what we might learn about God if we think about this scripture in a different light.

Today’s scripture officially starts at verse 21, but there are a few verses ahead of it that I think are helpful for context. I’m going to read Matthew 18:15-20, if you would like to follow along in your pew Bible (**page \_\_\_**). Keep in mind that while the chapters and verses and subdivisions and titles of the stories are helpful for modern reading, they weren’t present when Jesus was talking – think of it instead as one big sermon by Jesus. Pay attention to what it says about Gentiles and tax collectors, because we’re going to come back to that in a minute.

Matthew 18:15-20

“If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses.

*If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”*

Jesus continues, saying,

“Truly 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.”

In Jesus’ day, Gentiles and tax collectors were the most hated – they were seen by the Jews as the lowest of the low.

At first, when I read this text, I thought that it meant that if someone repeatedly sinned against me, Jesus was saying I could respond by treating them poorly and kicking them out of my life. But… That doesn’t seem like the gospel of the grace of Jesus to me. I think that if we just rotate the diamond a tad, we can see this as an invitation to a life of radical love. After all, how did Jesus treat Gentiles and tax collectors? *He healed a Canaanite woman’s daughter, he broke bread with a tax collector, and invited all to follow him.* So maybe in these verses, when he says to treat people like Gentiles and tax collectors, Jesus is calling his disciples to a transformative way of living in the world – a life defined by offering abundant love and grace.

When you continue reading to verse 21, Peter’s question now makes sense in context. Jesus has just claimed the unimaginable… I’m sure Peter was thinking, “Wait, you said what now? I’m supposed to love the Gentiles?? They’re not God’s people! And tax collectors literally steal money from hardworking Jews like me every year! You are crazy, Jesus!” Peter then asks just how much he has to forgive and love these people – you see, he wants a finite answer.

Peter suggests 7 as the number of times he should forgive people. Given that the Jewish law of the day was to forgive someone 3 times, I’m sure he felt pretty generous… He might have even been expecting a pat on the back or a high five from Jesus.

But, Jesus responds by saying, “You know Peter, you’ve kind of missed the point here. I tell you, not 7 times, but [depending on your translation], either 77 or 70 times 7 times”. Either way, *when we come at forgiveness and grace with a calculator in hand, we are not doing it in the way of Jesus.*

Jesus is inviting his followers into a transformational way of viewing and acting in the world – offering forgiveness and grace to others unconditionally. Instead of viewing the world as “us” versus “them”, Jesus is calling us to acknowledge that those who are different from us and even those that hurt us are created in the image of the same loving God that created us. With that being said, offering grace looks different in different situations. If you are in an unsafe or toxic relationship, I don’t think this scripture is calling you keep returning to that abuse. I don’t believe that God calls us to be doormats. Forgiving is not the same as forgetting, and in Matthew, Jesus tells us to be as harmless as doves, but as shrewd as snakes. Forgiveness is a process, and it’s not easy work that Jesus calls us to. But I do believe that when we forgive others, we spread the love of God throughout the world.

After shifting the attitude of the disciples away from a numerical max on forgiveness, Jesus continues, for this reason the kingdom of heaven (loving everyone and treating everyone the way Jesus treated Gentiles and tax collectors) may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. Now, you can compare opposites with each other to make a point… I wonder if the parable that follows is a way for Jesus to show Peter a picture of a system of finite forgiveness, and how that always ends with pain and misery. I wonder if through this parable, Jesus is teaching us that keeping score and only offering finite forgiveness is not the way of the Kingdom of God.

When I read this parable, I cannot find a single person who acts with this attitude of infinite forgiveness that Jesus is talking about. Sure, the king forgives the servant initially – but only with MAJOR strings attached (he expects the servant to be perfect, and when he isn’t, the forgiveness which was once offered, is withdrawn). The first servant had the opportunity to forgive his fellow servant but chose to live with his wallet as his god instead. The fellow servants had the chance to not make a bad situation worse but chose to spread gossip instead of grace.

While we’re talking about forgiveness and grace, I want to clarify something really quick: God’s grace of salvation and eternity in spent communion with God is powerful and amazing, but I think Jesus might be talking about something else here. Jesus often said that the Kingdom of God is here and now. Every week, we pray the Lord’s Prayer, we ask God to help us participate in the Kingdom Work of making Earth as it is in Heaven. But when we look at the world, we see a picture of our mistakes and finite grace. So often we don’t chose the Kingdom Way. God offers us infinite grace daily – with the hopes that we respond to that grace with acceptance and active participation in the Kingdom of God here on Earth.

I think a question we have to ask is: what happens when we don’t accept that daily grace? So, we need to talk about the elephant in the room: After this parable filled with pain and suffering, Jesus says in Matthew chapter 18, verse 35 “So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart”. A few weeks ago, when I saw the end of the scripture Andy chose for me to preach on, I knew that I had some wrestling with God to do. I prayed, I questioned, I doubted, I researched, I had a 2-hour theological debate with Andy, and I prayed some more.

I don’t believe in a God that sends lightning bolts from heaven to strike people down when they aren’t perfect (I assure you that if God did that, I would not be standing here today). However, I do believe in God that lets me live out the consequences of my own actions. I don’t think God imprisons me for choosing to turn away from Him in my daily life; I think that by turning away from God, I end up imprisoning myself.

Anyone that knows me can confidently say that I put the “pro” in “procrastination… and once (or twice) a semester I end up having to pull an all-nighter to write papers and/or prepare presentations (youth: procrastination is bad… do as I say, not as I do). As nice as it would be for God to show up during one of those all-nighters with a time machine so I can get my 8 hours of beauty sleep, I haven’t had that happen… yet. I think we can apply a similar logic to not living a life defined by forgiveness and grace: When we choose greed and gossip and anger, when we choose the side of the oppressor, when we are silent in the face of injustice, we are choosing to turn away from God. If living in the way of God is life giving, then it follows that turning away from God is life draining. God lets us live into a world of our own making, and too often we miss out on the joy of a grace filled life. When we don’t forgive our brothers and sisters from our hearts, we become bitter and imprison ourselves in a world of pain, as we saw in the parable of the unforgiving servant today.

As people in this world created by God, I believe that we have two different types of relationships: vertical (relationship with God), and horizontal (relationships with others). The cross behind me is a beautiful visual of this – we exist at the intersection of the vertical God relationship and the horizontal people relationships. In order to actively participate in the Kingdom of God here and now, forgiveness and grace must be offered and received in all directions of the cross.

Our scripture today teaches us that as Christ followers, we are called to offer grace and forgiveness to everyone in our lives. The words of today’s hymn of commitment we’re about to sing beautifully show this:

“We are called to be God's people

Showing by our lives His grace

One in heart and one in spirit

Sign of hope for all the race”

When we show love and grace to others, people see hope, and offering hope is always a way to show people Jesus.

As Christians, we affirm that God offers grace upon grace to us. Paul writes in Romans, “But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us”. Theologian Peter Rollins defines grace as accepting that we are accepted. For Rollins, grace is something that you participate in – you have to accept the grace that God is always offering to you. How often do we try to put God in a box and say, “I’ll ask for forgiveness for this, but God, you couldn’t possibly forgive me for that”. I pray that we may fully accept God’s grace that is being offered to us, and give ourselves some grace in the process.

*To actively participate in the Kingdom of God is to believe that the death and resurrection of Christ covers all of our mess and sins. It means that no one is too far gone for God’s love and grace to transform their lives, and that is good news indeed.*

When love and grace are flowing through us, both vertically and horizontally, we are loving our neighbor and loving our God; we actively participating in the Kingdom of God here and now. May it be so with you and with me. Amen.