

Sermon for the 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 14, 2008

Scriptures: Exodus 14:19-31
Matthew 18:21-35

“The Embrace of Salvation”

We have just heard two accounts of incredible delivery from impossible situations. They sound more like Hollywood excess than sober reality.

A man owes 10,000 talents. A single talent was more than fifteen years wages for a laborer. This man owed 10,000 talents. It was a debt impossible to pay. It was a debt that makes modern credit card difficulties seem like nothing. If we simply calculate the debt based on a laborer's wage in our time as \$10.00 per hour, the amount would be over three trillion dollars. We are not told how it was possible for him to accumulate such a debt, only that he owed that incredible sum. And even more incredibly, we are told that the debt was forgiven.

The Hebrew slaves were surviving in Egypt. They were going about their lives, marrying, having children, making do. All of a sudden things got out of control. Moses appeared on the scene. One disaster followed another as plagues of horrific magnitude disrupted life. Finally they were turned loose, set free, only to find themselves pursued by an angry army with horses and chariots and war weapons.

They run until they can run no further. A sea of water is in front of them and the army is just over the hill behind them. They are trapped in a hopeless situation, with no way of escape. Night falls. There is fire and cloud, running and screaming, horses and

chariots, water and mud. Then morning comes and the Hebrews are across the sea in safety, and the Egyptians are drowned, their chariots bogged down in the muck of the sea.

Probably no movie comes closer to the confusion and terror of warfare than does the opening of the movie “Saving Private Ryan.” The long sequence of the landing at Normandy is absolutely terrifying. My Old Testament Professor at Pittsburgh, Donald Gowan, believes the writer of Exodus was trying to depict some of the confusion and terror of battle in this account. Whatever one chooses to believe about a literal wall of water, the bottom line is that Israel made it safely across the sea during that night of terror, and the Egyptians did not. Israel was miraculously rescued, just as the man who owed the impossible debt was miraculously forgiven.

Yes, it sounds like Hollywood excess, except that we all know that we do find ourselves far too often in impossible situations. We are never quite certain how we managed to get there, but we are very sure of the impossibility of getting out. We manage to run up that huge credit card debt, we become entangled in those sticky, convoluted relationships that spiral out of control, we push that test or paper deadline until there is no possibility of doing well, we get involved in conflict that turns into war. We do all that, and more, and we do it repeatedly. And over and over God gives us another chance. And over and over we, like the forgiven debtor, are incognizant of how great a forgiveness we have received, and we demand that our neighbor behave perfectly toward us. Now, admit it, we do. The parable is about us.

The miraculous nature of salvation – rescue from the sea, forgiveness of impossible debt – is an important emphasis of these two stories. They remind us of how dependent we are upon the grace of God, how impossible our situation is apart from God’s power and grace. They serve to demonstrate that our condition is such that we are hopeless on our own. Neither Israel, nor the

debtor had any possibility of rescue aside from gracious intervention.

There is a further emphasis, which may be even more important. That is that miraculous salvation offers us an opportunity to enter a new context, to live differently, not simply rescued from disaster, but transformed, so that our rescue is whole, so that we are saved way beyond our original predicament. This offer of salvation is even greater and more miraculous than being rescued from the original problem. Sadly, we far too often fail to embrace that greater salvation and allow ourselves to be embraced by it.

The one who owed the impossible debt and was forgiven, lived in a context. It was an everyday context of debts and debtors. We acknowledge that context as we pray the Lord's Prayer. This context was an economic system that worked along the lines of you don't get something for nothing, and you get paid fairly for what you do. A pretty ordinary economic context. If you owe a debt, it has to be paid. The king's action of forgiving this huge debt violated the norms of that context. It blew the ordinary economic rules completely apart, just as Israel's rescue from vastly superior military forces blew the context of international relations completely apart.

Not only do these stories challenge us to acknowledge God's great grace, they also raise the question of how we will live having experienced that grace. Do we simply give thanks for unimaginable rescue, or do we live differently as a result? Do we allow the rescue to not only solve an immediate problem, but to also reorder the context for us?

The man whose debt had been forgiven had money owed to him. All around him the economic context was the same. His personal situation had become vastly different, but business is business and the man owed him money. He was unable to allow the salvation

he had received to alter the basic context in which he lived, and as a result he missed out on a salvation that would have been even greater than the forgiveness of his debt.

Israel too lived in a context, a geopolitical context. She had been miraculously rescued, but still kings are kings, and armies are armies. All throughout the Old Testament history, Israel was reminded of her creation by God, her rescue and salvation, and was invited to live within that context, and over and over again, Israel chose the tangible reality of military alliances and power, always ending tragically. Like the one who owed the impossible debt, Israel never came to a place of allowing the salvation she had received to change the overall context in which she lived.

I don't think it is an accident that Jesus sought to address this issue using a story about money, about economics. There is hardly a more powerful context for humans. And if anything that is more so for contemporary American Christians than it was for those first followers. We do a pretty good job of confessing the creed. Ninety percent of Americans profess a belief in God, and the majority of those include belief in Jesus Christ in that profession. But our economics, individual and corporate don't often reflect Christian values. The values our checkbook expresses are not all that well aligned with a recognition of miraculous salvation that has changed the context for us.

This fall as we spend some time together thinking about stewardship, I am going to challenge the session and all of you to seriously consider how the great salvation that you have received is being expressed by your economics. I am going to challenge you to allow God to transform your economic context as a means of entering more fully, more wholly into the complete salvation God offers us. Stewardship is a spiritual issue, and its disciplined exercise leads us to greater spiritual growth and wholeness. It helps us to begin to live within the changed context brought about by our salvation.

The good news of the Gospel is that our context has been changed by God's action in Jesus Christ. We are the ones who have received that good news; we can also be the ones who dare to live by it thereby discovering its fullness.

Thanks be to God!