

9.13.20 L24P15 As I have had Mercy on You

- As a teenager, and then as a young man, he committed several crimes
 - First he robbed a cab driver
 - Then he forged a check and possessed stolen property
 - Finally he stole hedge clippers from a neighbor
- He was not a model citizen. In fact, he was a thief, and he was the kind of person you didn't want to have around your neighborhood
- BUT this man whose name is Wayne Bryant lives in Louisiana, the prison capital of the world, and because they have had, and continue to have the THREE STRIKES AND YOUR OUT LAW, stealing the hedge clippers put in him jail for life, beginning 23 years ago back in 1997.
 - Bryant recently appealed his life sentence in court for stealing the hedge clippers, but his appeal was denied.
 - Here's what the one and only court judge who voted to end his life sentence wrote: "Each of [Bryant's] crimes was an effort to steal something. Such petty theft is frequently driven by the ravages of poverty or addiction... It is cruel and unusual to impose a sentence of life in prison at hard labor for... a failed attempt to steal a set of hedge clippers. [CC 9/9/20 p. 3]"
- We live in a world where so often mercy is rare, grudges are held, and forgiveness is often dismissed as weakness
 - And yet we Christians are in the "forgiveness business" – Jesus even said, "forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us."
 - But forgiveness can be frustrating. Like a good friend of mine likes to say, "People seem to think that I have the word SUCKER tattooed on my forehead."
 - And that invisible tattoo, that label perceived as weakness or foolishness in the eyes of others, that IS the risk of living out the radical idea that we can dare to forgive in a world where mercy is rare, grudges are held, and forgiveness is dismissed as weakness
 - Yes, we ARE called to be show mercy and forgiveness in this world, but this does NOT mean that we are called to take abuse.

- Instead this week's devotional prayer that was distributed from our bishop's office hints at the courage of forgiveness, "[God], let the light of your truth guide us to your kingdom through a world filled with lights contrary to your own. [Roman Missal]"
- In announcing the Kingdom of God, Jesus lifted up the difficulty of forgiveness in an unforgiving world in the parable for today
 - Jesus asked us to imagine that one man had embezzled a ridiculously large amount of money from his master – he had stolen ten thousand talents, which was about 700,000 pounds of gold!
 - There was literally no way in hell, no way in heaven, and no way on earth that this man could repay his master
 - But still, the master forgave the embezzler who was so deep in debt
 - After being given such great mercy and forgiveness, shortly after this embezzler was left with all his debt cancelled, he bumped into another man who owed him a much smaller amount of money – the equivalent of several months of wages for a laborer.
 - That debtor begged for mercy, but the man who had been forgiven his great debt showed no mercy, no forgiveness, and no grace, and he had the man thrown into prison
 - Now do you see the contrast? One man had a HUGE debt forgiven, but in turn, he could not show mercy or forgiveness for even a small debt
- Now Jesus told this parable in response to Peter's question about how often he should forgive another member of the church – perhaps seven times, Peter suggested?
 - And Jesus shocked Peter by saying *not seven times, but seventy-seven times!*
- Seventy-seven times or even more, but you see, forgiveness does not start with us, forgiveness really starts with God!
 - We *may think* that we are better than that person who owed a huge debt, but we are not

- Sin is not just the bad things that we do – sin is the separated and broken relationship that we and all humanity had with the God who created us
- But even if we don't steal our neighbor's hedge clippers or embezzle vast sums of money – even if we are relatively good, our self-righteousness and our pride in seeming goodness separates us from God by turning us in toward ourselves, and then without God, we can so easily feel that we don't have much need for God's forgiveness, because we're really ok.
- NAH! We, and all people have been separated from God, and the bad things – whether they be small or large that we do, are just the symptoms of our need for mercy, and OUR VAST need for God's gracious forgiveness
- So in Jesus Christ, his death and resurrection, God was willing to suffer and die a blameless death, and then to hold us blameless for all of our sin and brokenness by renewing us in a new relationship with God through a life that begins now, and never ends
- As recipients of God's HUGE gift of forgiveness, then Peter and we need to hear that if the world does not see the church as a seventy-seven-times-and-more forgiving community, then people outside the church will simply see us as hypocrites who talk a good line about God's love and forgiveness and life, but who then don't practice it
 - Instead, knowing God's forgiveness has been so precious to us, we might even dare to look like suckers to people outside the church, because overwhelming forgiveness starts with God, it does not start with us, it *continues* with us
 - *Again, let me be clear!* We do not forgive in order to become a doormat or continue in abusive relationships, we forgive because God has given us, and forgiving others allows us to let go of the grudges and the baggage when others harm us, and sometimes even enables us to let go of toxic relationships
 - So now let's go back to Wayne Brant, and his life sentence for stealing the hedge clippers.

- Let me read for you part of the commentary from the church magazine where I first saw Wayne Bryant's story, because it speaks so clearly about God's forgiveness much like Jesus did in his parable, and then our call to wear not the tattoo of a sucker, but the tattoo of a faithful forgiver: "If Wayne Bryant's case doesn't evoke righteous indignation in those of us who claim to walk as yet by faith, something is deeply amiss with our understanding of divine justice. A righteous community is supposed to reflect the character of God and 'defend the cause of the poor' (Ps. 72:4). I can't think of a greater calling for religious people than to yearn for the flourishing of vulnerable individuals. (p. 3, Peter Marty)"
- God forgives. Therefore we forgive each other. And we share that good news through both the church's example and the church's words so others even outside the church might come to know God's gracious, merciful, and amazing forgiveness