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Living for the Lord: Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35

You all know I'm a big fan of Camp Kintail. What a wonderful place for kids to go: to have fun, to meet new people, to experience a way of being church that is perhaps a little bit more real and vibrant than what they might experience in their home communities. What a wonderful place to go and ask questions about God and the world and their lives. What a wonderful place to go to be reminded of God's good and beautiful creation, and to hear the stories of how much their own lives matter to God. This summer I was blessed to be able to return as the chaplain for a week at the end of the summer. I spent time with cabin groups and staff and led some FLASH (Faith, Learning, and Sharing) and generally caught a glimpse into where and how the church can be present for young people in the camp context. It was a wonderful week. At one of the camper FLASH's, we did "ask the chaplain" – basically the kids get to ask whatever questions they want. Since they had just sung "I just wanna be a sheep", we talked about what hypocrites, Pharisees, and Sadducees are, and why we don't want to be goats. Then one boy, about 11 or 12 years old, put up his hand and asked whether God could forgive the devil. Hmmm…

I responded that God was all about forgiveness and can and does forgive everyone. But then, before I could go any further (to explain that God has in fact already forgiven everyone in Jesus Christ), a counselor stepped in to explain to this kid that before God would forgive people, they would need to make up for all the bad things they had done in equal measure – kind of an eye-for-an-eye thing. So, the devil would have a whole lot of things to make up for before God would forgive him. This counselor's viewpoint wasn't anything out of the ordinary (though I did mention it to the director), after all, that's pretty much how we understand our relationships in the world these days: in a transactional kind of way. You do this, I will do that. If I do something wrong, I need to do something to make up for it. These are relationships we understand. They are relationships wherein we try to stay in the black, without a debt owing of any kind – a debt of kindness, a debt of gratitude, a debt of an offense, a debt of money or of service or of affection. Why else would we use phrases like 'being in someone's good/bad books'? This approach to relationships guides everything we do in our society – we live in a system which is based on merit, reward and punishment. Good work is rewarded with promotions, praise, and raises. Good behavior results in more screen time. Good community contribution is rewarded with volunteer recognition plaques. Bad behavior results in loss of friendships, legal action, money owing, jobs lost, etc… And there are all kinds of structures in our society which reinforce this way of being with one another: jails, debt collection agencies, time-outs for children, awards for this and that, Santa Claus…

But in God's Kingdom economy, things don't work that way. So, although her viewpoint was shaped by the world we live in, I was a little saddened that her understanding of God's grace wasn't just a little bit bigger. I had to do a little verbal finessing to correct the teaching without making her feel badly. So, we all chatted a bit about Jesus, and the kinds of people Jesus forgave without requiring anything

from them at all. We talked about the cross, where Jesus gave himself up in order to reconcile all of humanity, past, present, and future to God – to make us right with him, no matter what we have done against him or how many times we mess up. In the cross we recognize that nothing we could ever do could make up for the ways we fail to live up to the covenant God has made with us no matter how hard we try, and in the cross we experience God's big "I love you anyway. Come and enter into the life of freedom and abundant grace that I am giving to you."

This is what Jesus was hinting toward when he told the parable about the extravagant forgiveness of the king who forgave an enormous and unpayable debt (Matt 18:21-35). Now, we should note that the parable is just that – a parable. But it makes the point. Given the incredible gift of forgiveness that the king granted the servant, how could this servant treat anyone else with stinginess and selfishness and a misuse of power over another?

This servant who received a grace beyond his wildest imagination still believed he was 'owed' something by another servant. And there is where the problem lies: in our understanding of what we are owed, what we deserve, and what is fair. We have such muddled up ideas about reward and punishment for our deeds. We have 'tit-for-tat' ideas about what fairness entails. And we miss the point that in Jesus Christ, God threw the whole fairness book out of the window. The reality is that God doesn't deal in fair. God doesn't deal in who deserves what with respect to reward and punishment, with respect to owing and payback. God deals in extravagant un-merited love and gracious forgiveness. God knows that his beloved creatures can't love him the way that he intended them to. God knows that the fellowship and communion he longed to share with his image-bearers could never arise from such a selfish and wayward people. And so God took the steps necessary to ensure that his image-bearers could be freed to experience that fellowship and communion anyway. It isn't fair. Thanks be to God that it isn't fair! Praise God for his goodness!

What Paul and Jesus are both getting at in the passages that we have read today is that that kind of grace, in the humble-hearted, inspires a deeply rooted kind of ripple-effect response. It is a response that is born out of the experienced reality that righteousness (our right relationship with God) isn't earned or achieve. It is pure gift. It is a response that deliberately interrupts the relentless cause and effect/reward and punishment rhythm of the world we live in. Since we have experienced such grace, since we have been all welcomed equally into God's embrace, since we are all in the same boat, an appropriate and fitting response is to build our human relationships on that same reality of unmerited grace and forgiveness – regardless of the offense we might experience at the hands of another. Let's see how that plays out in Paul's teaching to the believers in Rome.

As I mentioned last week, Paul has spent the first half of his letter laying out just how wide and deep and broad and high is God's love for us. Now, in these later chapters, Paul outlines how believers ought to live together and in their community in a way that befits their identity as people who are deeply loved by God.

Paul encourages the believers in Rome not to look for opportunities to be right about everything (Rom 14:1-12). Clearly there were some believers who thought they should still keep the old dietary laws of the Torah and there were others who believed that God had freed them from that and they could enjoy all foods. These two different groups were experiencing quite a bit of conflict, each thinking the other weren't 'true' Christians because of what they ate. Both groups could make perfectly legitimate theological arguments about why their position was the right one. But Paul steps in and reminds them that those who eat meat and those who don't are both equally loved and forgiven and righteous before God – so really, what's the big deal. If God isn't going to draw a line in the sand between you, then surely you shouldn't either with one another. The way that we live together is a testimony to the character of God and to our experience of God's grace. Paul goes on to say that everything we do, everything we think, in fact, our entire lives are to be lived in response to who God is and what God has done: if we live, we live to the Lord. If we die, we die to the Lord. So whether we live or whether we die, we belong to the Lord." "So, for God's sake, stop judging one another over such things and get on with the business of living for the Lord!"

There is an old English proverb (and I have no idea where it comes from) that says, "faults are thick where love is thin." Let's go back to that king and the servant in Jesus' parable. We could spend a lot of time trying to psycho-analyze him and we might come up with some helpful insights. But you know, I think it really comes down to this: those who have experienced little of God's grace, love little. Which leads me to wonder if we would all be better lovers and better forgivers and better neighbours and better friends if we spent a little more time focusing on the wideness of God's love and forgiveness of us. Perhaps that ripple effect might grow a little wider in our lives. Perhaps old hurts would be healed. Perhaps we could extend forgiveness in the face of old wrongs – regardless of whether the other person is sorry or not.

Last week, several churches in the area (mainline protestant, Catholic, and evangelical) came together to celebrate our common faith in an ecumenical worship service. If we were to sit down and talk about the things that make us different we would have a long list: kneeling benches, a different understanding and practice of the sacraments of communion and baptism, what kinds of behaviours are acceptable for Christians, etc… We could have judged one another or called one another weak for observing various practices which we ourselves don't believe to be important. We could have stayed in our own little churches where we are comfortable and said we don't want to go and worship with the Catholics or the Baptists or the evangelicals, because they don't do it our way. But we didn't. The worship service last week was a testimony for everyone around us that God is bigger than our differences, bigger than the offenses that we may have caused one another, and that we share a common foundation of God's creating, saving, and reconciling work in Jesus Christ. The church was packed and, at the BBQ afterwards, the fellowship went on for two more hours. I think the preparation for the service, the worship

itself, and the fellowship afterwards was a testimony to a way we (the Church) can truly live for the Lord as a common fellowship of believers.

So – my encouragement to you this week: when we find ourselves being quick to judge (whether we think we are in the right or not), let's step back for just a minute and allow the Holy Spirit to remind us of what God has done for us ***and*** that person or situation we are being quick to judge. Does it cost anything more than pride to love them? Are there places where we could build on our common faith for the glory of God? Are there people we need to forgive and love anyway? Are there situations that we need to let go of so that we can be free to experience the depth of God's forgiveness and grace? Whatever we do and say and think, let it be because of God's mercy – let it be *for* God and a true reflection of this King we claim as our Lord.