

Sermon

All Saints' Episcopal Church

The Rev. Kim Jackson

Gospel Reading: Matthew 18:21-35

17 September, 2017



Holy God, please open our hearts that we may hear a Word that transforms our lives by drawing us closer to you. Amen.

After a particularly dismal quarter, a regional office manager named Tom, sees the Corporate headquarter's phone number flash across his caller ID. He gets a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach, but answers anyway. The person on the other end simply says that an executive would like to meet with him today.

Tom knows exactly what this meeting will be about. He's worked in the field long enough to know that when a regional branch ends a quarter like his branch did, it's the mark of the end of that manager's job.

He arrives at headquarters with sweaty palms and a lump in his throat, but he pushes down his urge to run.

Standing in the executive's all glass office, he hears her say, "Tom, thank you for your service, but it is no longer needed at this company. You're fired and security is here to escort you out."

Now, even though he knew it was coming, he hadn't planned his reaction. It's just that the news was just too devastating to take in silence. So Tom begs with her for his job. He pleads. Tears even begin to stream down his face – standing in that glass office he pleads for his job, for his life, for his family's livelihood.

The executive, perhaps moved by the Holy Spirit, changes her posture. Overcome with compassion for Tom, she says to him, "Tom, It's OK. You can keep your job. Last quarter's numbers don't matter. It's ok. You can stay. We will work with you. Let's all just forget about last quarter."

In shock, Tom shakes her hand and walks out of her office. On the drive back from headquarters, he shifts through a multitude of emotions: first shock, then relief, next elation, and then he settles in on anger. He feels humiliated. He can't believe that he behaved that way at headquarters in front of all of those people.

By the time he pulls into the parking lot at the branch, he's fuming – filled with embarrassment and anger at his department for letting him down with their poor performance.

Tom stomps into his branch, finds his subordinate, and in a fit of absolute rage, he screams, "You! Because of your poor performance you almost got me fired today! It's your fault! You almost got me fired! So you know what? You're fired!" And he turns his back to pleas and protests from his subordinate.

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My siblings in Christ, when Jesus offers us parables like this, the offering comes with an implicit invitation for us to consider the story and to ask how could this have gone differently? What could have made this better?

Many preachers in their pulpits today will posit, just Matthew does, that this interaction would have ended better if Tom had shown mercy, just as he was shown mercy. And that's true. The story would have been different. But today, I want to suggest that this story would of had a different ending, if Tom had *truly believed* the executive when she told him that all was forgiven.

If Tom had truly believed that there wasn't a note going into his personnel file — if he had truly believed that she was being honest about providing him with help — If he had honestly believed that she meant what she said, that "It's ok." I think this story would have been different.

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Today, I want us to consider how might our lives be different if we really believed the promises that Jesus offers us. How might our lives be different if we really really believed, deep within our being that we are a forgiven people? That we, all of us, and even those of us who aren't here, are God's beloved children made in God's image? How might our lives be different, if even for just one day, we believed that our role on earth is not to judge one another, but instead to simply love each other?

Now, I live in this world and in this culture with you, and so I'm clear this isn't easy. There are all kinds of opposing messages that tell us that we *shouldn't* believe this vagrant man named Jesus from Nazareth who did more talking than anything else.

We live in a culture that inundates us with the message that when a mistake is made, it must be punished with the full weight of our criminal justice system. Many of you work in companies like the one I described today, where the bottom line matters more than your ability to care for yourself and others.

Through all kinds of explicit and implicit messaging we learn to believe that some lives matter more than others. That if you're wearing clean clothes and have been able to take a shower recently, that that makes us better than the unhoused children of God.

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I don't actually know who or how I came to learn this, but I remember being in high school and figuring out that the only way to be accepted was that I had to wear make-up everyday, do harsh things to make my hair a different texture, and wear nothing bigger than a size 5. Those were the messages that I received...

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We get so many messages that tell us *never* to forgive the people, or leaders, or countries that hurt us. We are encouraged hate those on the other side of the aisle, and to dismiss the intellect of anyone who thinks differently about social issues than us.

But you know, if Tom had really believed the promises made by his boss, I think he would returned to his branch with good news. Not only was his job safe, but there would be help for the branch. Corporate offices were taking an interest in them and committed to helping them become the best that they could be.

And if we really believed the promise made by our God – it's like that Annie Dillard quote that Simon used last week – it'd be like playing with TNT! If we took seriously – if you and I could hold within our hearts the good news that we are a forgiven people loved by God – I think this world would be completely transformed.

If we really believed that our neighbor, that our politicians, that people who addicted, unhoused or in prison – that police officers *and* protestors, queer and straight, documented or not...that our president ... if we really believed that we are all, each of us, were made in the image of God, even just for one day: O what a day, what a day would be!

Oh gracious God, please help our unbelief. Amen.

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