

“A PARALLEL (OR PERPENDICULAR?) UNIVERSE”

A Sermon for the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 17, 2017

Text: Matthew 18:21-35

“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to . . .”

So start many of the parables of Jesus.

Another way to say that is “It is like this, with the kingdom of heaven.” Or, “The kingdom of heaven is kind of like this . . .”

Jesus then tells a parable. And even though the parable is partly confusing, we may emerge on the other side of it, after listening carefully, with a clearer concept of the kingdom of heaven. We shouldn’t take too much out of the parable—just the main point.

So, for example, God is kind of like a king. But not really. And it’s kind of like he keeps track of what we his slaves owe us. But not exactly. And so on.

Let me tell you what I take from this parable. (It is good news, actually.)

With the kingdom of heaven, it is kind of like this.

It’s kind of like, God has two attitudes towards his people whom he has created from dust and placed in the earth. But not exactly. But let’s say he does.

On the one hand, God keeps track. God says things need to be counted. People (and God) own things, and they should be honest about paying obligations. It’s kind of like that, between God and people.

But on the other hand, God is generous to us. He lets us get away with not paying all we owe to God.

We are kind of like the slave in this parable. We kind of owe everything we have, plus a lot more, to God. More than we can pay. It’s kind of true, hey?

And we’re kind of like the slave in this story. When the chips are down, we grovel and beg. We’re not too proud to ask God to let us off the hook.

And we’re also kind of like the slave in this respect, that when we get away with something or we strike it rich or whatever, we get really happy and we forget what or whom we owe our happiness to. We go back to pretending we are self-made people.

And, of course, we don’t forget that fair is fair, and people should pay their debts to us, of course.

The parable says . . . Jesus says that people are double-minded. We want God or fate or society to overlook everything we do that is wrong; on the other hand we want our share from God or fate or society. Which is hypocritical, of course, but who isn’t a hypocrite these days?

Now Jesus’ first point is that we are hypocritical. We love justice when it helps us; and we love mercy when it helps us. (So maybe we’re not hypocritical: We’re consistently self-centered.)

But Jesus considers us hypocrites. And his second point is also not about the slave, who is just a character in a story. It’s about you and me.

We deliberately OPT OUT of the opportunity God gives us to actually LIVE in a universe which operates according to God’s mercy. We prefer NOT to have our minds and hearts be transformed by the gracious action of our God in forgiving all our sins. Like the slave in the story, the only use we have for mercy is to help us crawl back out of God’s kingdom of life and peace, into the dog-eat-dog world of people who would rather have a piece of cake than the peace of God.

The slave was a knucklehead! Why, having been forgiven so much, was he not turned? Converted? Why did he not suffer himself to become like the king?

We are knuckleheads, if we—having been forgiven and adopted and blessed with the Spirit of Christ—walk out of the door and turn back into the caricatures of people that we were before that wonderful moment, that apotheosis?

How can people who have been forgiven as much as we have been forgiven, ever despise or hurt another human being?

Do you remember the woman who washed Jesus' feet with her tears, whom Simon the Pharisee despised? Jesus said of her "She has been forgiven much; therefor she loves much."

You and I have probably never choked anyone who owed us a thousand dollars. At least, I hope not. But that's just in the parable. Jesus wasn't really talking about a slave and a king. He was talking about you—fill in your name—and how you have despised or hurt another person. Anyone. How you have neglected to show mercy. Refused to go with them even the first mile, much less the second.

You have done all of that after you have been forgiven much.

With the kingdom of heaven, it's kind of like this. It's kind of like there are two universes parallel to each other, with all the same people and stuff, but existing with different rules. In one universe, the true and good one, the one our Creator wants us to belong to, in that universe, we are governed not by rules but by the Spirit of Christ. Love fulfills the law.

If we refuse to live in that kingdom, we fall into a default universe that runs perpendicular to God's will, in which sinners (since that's what we all are) are constantly fighting God's law. It's torture, and it doesn't get better. People choke each other in this

world in the name of fairness. They live against God instead of giving thanks to God.

Two universes. In one, the Spirit of Christ leads us. In the other, people are always telling each other what to do, but they aren't really fulfilling the law themselves.

Let me tell you another story about Jesus to show you how these two universes are at odds with each other. It's difficult to see, but good Christian theology is not for the faint of heart!

A ruler talked with Jesus once about how to get into the kingdom of heaven. He had followed every single rule. From childhood! But Jesus was sad, because he could see that the man did not really love either God or his neighbors. (It was a dead giveaway, when he said "How can I get into the kingdom of heaven?" So Jesus tested him just a little: "Go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and come follow me." In other words—love your neighbors as yourself, and love God with all your heart.

The man was living in the wrong universe, in which the rules of God were just for his own self-perfecting. Poor man, he had never done anything that needed forgiving!

But you and I are different. We have not kept all the commandments from our childhood. We are sinners. And we are forgiven. And on the strength of that fuel, taking the bread and wine of forgiveness, we are equipped to live in a sort of alternate reality, I guess you might call it that, in which we are moved, and moved again, and our lives are given direction, by the mercy God has shown to us through his Son Jesus Christ, who is his very image and reflection.

We are in the world. The real world. But we don't have to act like it. When we leave the presence of the king who has forgiven us so much, when we walk out into the parking lot, when we go home, etc., we walk differently, see differently, think differently.

After all, we're not knuckleheads, are we?