

Sunday, September 13, 2020
Sermon: Hope and the Apocalypse
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Many people have asked this – people on Facebook, Twitter, members of our congregation and even weather reporters have asked the same question recently – and it seems like we have been asking this question for the last many years, which is: Is this the apocalypse?

I want to tell you a little bit about the apocalypse and what this word means so we can take a deep breath as we enter into the chaos of the moment. Apocalypse does not mean end of the world. What apocalypse literally means is unveiling, or a revealing. And so what apocalyptic literature in the Bible is trying to do is to reveal to us two very important things: 1) what God is truly like, and 2) what humans are like. This is what Jesus's mission was all about. It's a revelation of what it means to be truly human. Oftentimes, Jesus will tell stories, what we call parables, about what it means to live into the Kingdom of God. And he will also tell parables about what it looks like when we refuse to live into the Kingdom of God. What is that like.

Jesus throughout his ministry gives very plain and clear teachings about what the Kingdom of God is like. About what his realm is like, and he invites us to live into that realm. Jesus often tells parables. And these parables, as Alison told us earlier, are open to multiple interpretations and sometimes the parables have different meanings to us at different times. There are also things from a historical context that we can miss as we read these parables. So I want to highlight some of these things to you because I really believe that Jesus himself, in his teachings and in his parables, is apocalyptic. Jesus is the apocalypse himself for Christians.

For Christians, Jesus is the fundamental unveiling of God in our midst. Our parable today starts with the very clear teachings of Jesus which is to forgive. To live into a spirit of forgiveness not just seven times but going the extra mile as Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount - forgive seven times seventy, forgive, forgive, forgive. Now I already know many of you have written in the comment section - and this is absolutely true - there are people who have hurt us so much that it is hard to forgive. And there are times when we have hurt people so much it is hard for others to forgive us. This is the reality of the world in which we live in and sometimes when we hear Jesus say things like - you must forgive - it feels almost like he's cracking a whip at us and asking us to do almost something that's impossible. As if this is some kind of power trip that Jesus has over us - you can only be my follower if you really forgive someone. And when forgiveness is used as a power trip like that I want you to take a step back. I want you to hear forgiveness in a slightly different way because sometimes forgiveness means reconciliation. Sometimes it means that we need to work towards that, but forgiveness does not mean reconciliation with someone who abuses you or continues to abuse you. Forgiveness comes from the Greek word 'aphiyemi.' When Jesus uses the word aphiyemi, it means to create space between.

Sometimes, forgiveness means creating a distance between you and someone who has really hurt you. Sometimes, forgiveness means I need to separate myself from you, but I wish you well. Sometimes, forgiveness means letting go of the resentment that is within our souls because, as the old phrase says - resentment is a poison that will just destroy your soul. And so sometimes, forgiveness means separation from someone who has hurt you and if that's what we can do, that is good enough.

Jesus says - keep forgiving, keep getting the resentment out of your soul, keep getting the hatred for this other person out of your soul because it is toxic. It will consume your other relationships too. And so forgiveness sometimes means stepping away.

Now, Jesus tells this parable after his very clear teaching about forgiving seven times seventy times. Stepping away if you have to. Seeking reconciliation if that's possible. He tells this parable, and I want you to put this before you, when Jesus says - the Kingdom of God can be compared to this... - and then he tells a story, that comparison might be the Kingdom of God is exactly like this. But the comparison might also be the Kingdom of God is nothing like this. I think that there's something in this parable where Jesus says - this is not what the Kingdom of God is like. Stick with me here on this because when Jesus tells this parable about a King who forgives a debt and then goes back on his forgiveness and puts this person into a torture chamber until he can pay off the debt, Jesus is talking about a King that is not a Jewish King. And how do we know this? Because this King puts the man and his family into slavery. In the ancient Jewish world, you could put a man into slavery, or into servanthood, but you could not put their family into slavery.

So this is a first hint that this is something outside of the Kingdom of God. Outside of Jesus's Jewish world view. This is a story about a King that is of the world, not of the Kingdom of God. This is a story about a King who is outside of the workings of God and here's how it goes. Jesus says – forgive, forgive, forgive, forgive, seven times seventy times – and then he tells a story about a King who is so wealthy that he has servants or slaves working for him. These people are probably folks who are the King's tax collectors because this first servant that comes to the King is supposed to have a billion dollars. There's only one way in the ancient world where you could have that much money and it is through taxing people. It is a servant who taxes people and then gives part of that tax to the King so that the King can get more wealthy.

This system that we are looking at here in this parable is an oppressive economic system and everybody plays into that system. So the King says to this first slave, this first servant of his, this first tax collector of his, that he's going to put him in prison until he can pay off all of that debt. But the man says - give me time and I will pay you back everything. So the King says – okay, I forgive you. But this forgiveness is forgiving him out of jail. It is not forgiving him the debt. It is saying – okay, you can go back to being a tax collector, but you have to pay me back later. It is continuing an economic system of oppression that benefits those who are at the very top and a few others who play into the system. So this guy who gets his life back goes to another servant who owes him money and he says - you owe me seven hundred dollars. And the guy says - I can't pay that, have mercy on me. And the guy throws him into jail and says - I'm not gonna forgive you.

So here this first slave is not playing into the system because the system, this economic system, is supposed to work where you just buy time in order to pay off your debts. You don't actually forgive them the debts, you buy time and you pay it off later. That's how this system works in this world. You'll notice that there were other servants who see that this guy is not playing by the economic system. He's not forgiving this guy his debt and allowing him to pay it off later, and so they get all upset because this guy is bucking the system. So these people go to the King and say – hey, he's not playing by the economic system of oppression that we have set up, that we all benefit from as tax collectors. And the King says – oh, what are you doing messing with the system.

It's not really about forgiveness, it's about deferred payment, deferred debt, so that you pay it off later and you pay into the system. So that's when the King says - you're not paying into this economic system and so I'm going to have to put you in prison until you pay it all off. Do you see the economic system of oppression? The economic system of violence within this where debt is never really forgiven, it is always deferred. This is economic systems that we have today in the United States. It's economic systems that have been with us from nearly the beginning of human history. And Jesus comes into this and tells this parable, not as a way of saying this is exactly what the Kingdom of God is like, but saying this is the opposite of the economic system that the Kingdom of God is like. Sure, you might be able to get debt deferred, but it is never really debt forgiven.

Alison just led us in the Lord's Prayer and there are many different versions of it. One of my favorite versions is where Jesus says, and this is the literal Greek that is in the New Testament, it says - forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. For the Kingdom of God, this is not debt that is forestalled that you have to pay later. This is debt that is literally forgiven. That is the economic system that Jesus is bringing in and please do not overly spiritualize Jesus. This is about spiritual debt. Sins that we commit against one another, but Jesus is also concerned about your economic well-being. Jesus is concerned about the economic well-being of those of us who are in economic debt because of a health care system that deprives us of good health care and then puts us in economic debt. Jesus cares about this. Jesus cares that our homeless siblings can find housing and food. Jesus cares about the economy in which we live. That is what this parable is getting at and here is how Jesus concludes his parable. This is the apocalyptic revelation that we need to listen to. Jesus says this at the end - so my Heavenly Father will also do to every one of you if you do not forgive your brothers and your sisters from your heart.

What does that mean when Jesus has just said – forgive, forgive, forgive? That means God has set up the world in such a way that if you do not want to live into forgiveness, you don't have to. God has set up the world in such a way that if you want to oppress people in an economic system that creates incredible wealth for the King that's at the top and for his friends, you can do that. God is going to allow you to do that. If you want to live into a world that has created an idol out of an economy that the more we run this economy, the more we're going to pollute the air and cause all of these catastrophic natural disasters. If that's how you want to live your life God says you can do that.

I just heard this morning that a political leader that you all know is excited from a speech last night because he feels that he has been slighted and he literally said - now I can be more vicious. As the election comes up closer, now I can be more vicious.

Jesus gives us options. You can live into forgiveness. Sometimes that means separation, sometimes that means moving away from somebody who has abused us. You can live into a world of mercy or you can live into a world of viciousness. You can live into a world that continues the cycle of debt against one another or you can live into a different economy, a different exchange, one of forgiveness. One of love. One that enters into this world that is so often moved by an exchange of viciousness towards one another. How anti-Christian can you get to say - now I can be even more vicious. That has nothing to do with Christianity because Christianity enters into a vicious world and seeks to transform it and that is what Jesus is calling us to live into.

When you experience moments that seem apocalyptic, wildfires, tornadoes, hurricanes, what do you do? You don't add to the viciousness of the world. You seek to help people just like those of us who are in the Black Lives Matter movement here in Portland. Our friends at [JUICE](#) which is justice, unity, integrity, community and equality - go look them up on Facebook - just like our friends at [JUICE](#) who have pivoted from protests, continuing to protest, but also who are now pivoting and helping those who are evacuating by getting food and water and clothing to people who are in need. That is the world in which Jesus calls us to live into. To work for a more just world, not a more vicious world. To live into forgiveness, not into viciousness. To seek no matter who you are, if you've been working for us, if you've been spreading rumors like, "no, actually you guys are spreading these wildfires," don't believe those rumors! But, if you are spreading those rumors, "Hey, here's some clothing for you if you need it. Here's some water for you if you need it and some food. If you need a place to stay you can come to one of our churches." Why? Because Jesus tells us. And we know that the world needs more forgiveness and more mercy and more justice now more than ever. That is the apocalyptic warning, the revelation that Jesus gives us. That God is a God of love. But God will allow us to not live into that love. God gives us the option to be vicious, but Jesus calls us to love.

So friends, in a world that is going through so many problems right now, many resist living into viciousness, may we resist that temptation. May we enter into a world that's not an economy of debt deferred, but forgiveness given. And may we boldly love all the more. Amen