

Do you ever feel like you are chained to a reality that limits life and keeps you from enjoying God's creation? If it is only occasionally, you are a person to be envied, my friend. Most of us deal with the constraints of our own sin every day. And if that weren't enough, we have to deal with the sins of others that impact our lives, too. How can we become free from the worry about sin and live more fully in God's kingdom? Today, we want to explore this. (The paper chain you see in the baptismal font has our names on each loop. During the sermon, we're going to consider what can happen when we break that chain and put ourselves together in a different way.)

The world wide web is a place where you can read a lot of witty sayings. Some are wise, many are not. You can't always believe what you read—especially on the internet. But this week I ran across three things that have the potential of being wisdom. They might help us dig into today's gospel and come away with something that can improve life and build community.

The first WWW "proverb" is: Experience is what you get when you didn't get what you wanted.

I'm sure everyone here would agree that things don't always turn out the way you had hoped they would. There are even times when they don't turn out the way they normally would. We're living in a time when the normal isn't normal anymore. We don't even have the perspective to predict what will work and what will become a disaster based on past experience. So we try and do our best, but it doesn't always work. The people around us then have to deal with what we've set in motion, too. And that street goes both ways— as a community, we have to deal with the best intentions of others that go awry in our present reality. That can take energy and patience, can't it?

The second "proverb" I ran across is: When tempted to fight fire with fire, remember that the Fire Department usually uses water.

Now I know that sometimes, like in the west right now, they have to use a controlled burn to create a place where raging fires have to stop, but usually pouring fire on fire just makes everything hotter. That's why the response to fire has to be something different. Water is the most economical, available and efficient way to stop the burning in most cases. Have you seen the Dominoes' commercial where they talk about how to get the pizzas to customers in pandemic times? They tried throwing it like a frisbee, which checked the social distancing box, but it didn't work too well. So they went back to what they did best, delivery, and adapted the handoff to improve their service to their community.

The last "proverb" is this: People tend to make rules for others and exceptions for themselves.

It's easy to do. We see a bigger picture, know more of the story, when it comes to our actions. We don't see anything close to the reality of others. So we give ourselves wider latitude and have higher expectations for those around us. It's just part of human nature after Adam and Eve took a bite of that forbidden fruit.

So Jesus, in Matthew's gospel, is building a different kind of community, the Kingdom of God, by making space for other actions and attitudes in relationships. Remember that first proverb: *Experience is what you get when you didn't get what you wanted*? Jesus invites them, and us, to look deeper into what happens to us and through us to see the signs that God wants to bless. Where people have naturally seen scarcity, Jesus helps them see sufficiency. Remember the banquet that started with a few fish and loaves of bread. In this new space, little becomes much, everyone brings something to the table, and God provides for the needs of God's people.

Remember the second proverb: *When tempted to fight fire with fire, remember that the Fire Department usually uses water*? Jesus also shows his disciples that those on the margins—the last, the least and the lost—have a place in this kingdom. Often they have more faith in the one who grants them citizenship than the people who think they deserve it. Remember the gentile woman who wanted her daughter healed. There comes a time when change is not as much a criticism of how we've done things in the past as it is a recognition of new opportunities in the present.

And last week, we saw Jesus set up a standard operating procedure when conflict between people arises. He said the first step was to go to the person, privately, and try to work things out. Only after that dignify preserving step, could a person engage the assistance of others. The last and most drastic action was to have the faith community get involved. Their primary task was to focus on inclusion and welcoming, not disciplining and separation. It brings to mind that third proverb: *People tend to make rules for others and exceptions for themselves.* Maybe we would be well served to adopt a rule that binds God to God's people: grace is the starting point.

Today, we hear the account written by one who loved rules and knew how to take them further than most people: Matthew, the tax collector. He knew how to use the rules to his advantage and that meant making life harder for those he came into contact with.

Matthew's realization of the radical difference of the kingdom of God must have been mind blowing. He saw the power of grace and forgiveness. He saw the life-giving nature of relationships where that was welcomed and practiced.

All the stories from the gospel we've been hearing these past several week are about what can happen when we adopt a new mental model of how the world works. Today, Jesus stresses the power of repentance and forgiveness when it is a part of every relationship. Imagine what it would be like if we had the confidence that our neighbors would recognize our dignity by seeing us through God's eyes. We could take the risk and repent, ask for forgiveness, because we would know the priority of the Kingdom—the restoration of relationships.

In our gospel today, Peter has begun to grasp this kingdom principle and he wants to know how often to use it. He starts by proposing granting forgiveness to the repentant seven times. On the eighth time, however, even if the person is sorry for what he or she has done, they've reached a reasonable limit and the one hurt doesn't have to forgive, right?

Jesus says, "No. It's a good start, but if they are sorry for what they did to you, but keep on forgiving." From a human perspective, that is impossible. And that's why Jesus tells the parable of the forgiven man who refuses to forgive others.

We are the man so deeply in debt that it affects those nearest and dearest to us. When we realize the extent of forgiveness poured into our own lives, we naturally want to pass it on, to pay it forward. That is what builds healthy community and satisfying relationships. It's what most of us want, even when we get something else. It's what we work to enhance in our own communities, even when we use the wrong things to build it. And it's what we dream of when we make rules for others and excuses for ourselves.

We have been given the keys of the kingdom—the way to jumpstart God's domain in our own community. Radical forgiveness. When we break the chains of sin with it, something beautiful is seen.