**SERMON SPARK!**

Text: Matthew 18:21-35

Theme: A JUST FORGIVENESS AND THE WAY OF PEACE

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I. GOD’S INVITATION TO A WAY OF JUST PEACE

 A. GOD SPEAKS (18:21-22)

1. God speaks about the importance of relationships.
2. God speaks about the mathematics of forgiveness.
3. God speaks, inviting all into a just forgiveness.

 B. GOD’S INVITATION TO RESTORE PEACE (18:23-27)

1. God repeatedly invites all people to forgive.
2. God calls upon everyone to seek freedom and reconciliation.

II. DISMANTLING UNJUST SYSTEMS OF OPPRESSION

1. GOD’S APPEAL FOR THE WAY OF PEACE (18:28-29)
2. God shows us the impact of oppressive systems on relationships.
3. God examples an unjust heart that gives way to oppression.
4. GOD’S MATHEMATICS FOR FREEDOM AND A JUST FORGIVENESS (18:30)
5. God shows us that “a just forgiveness” equals peace.
6. God calculates that patience equals freedom.

III. GOD’S HOPE FOR HUMANITY (18:31-34)

1. TRUSTING IN GOD’S FORGIVING GRACE
2. God challenges our understanding of justice and forgiveness.
3. God calls upon all to forgive one another as God has forgiven us.
4. GOD’S GRAND REVERSAL (18:35)
5. God’s reversal calls forth repairing breached relationships.
6. God’s reversal calls forth repentance, reconciliation, and compassion.

**Narrative Context:**

Jesus teaches that we will find the road to freedom by embracing “a just forgiveness.” Jesus emphasizes that this kind of forgiveness operates differently from the ways of this world. For example, Chapter 18 has to do with the equal value that God’s grace exemplifies upon all people. We see this exemplified in verses 1-6 when Jesus speaks of the kingdom of Heaven and includes the children’s role in it. Jesus further demonstrates God’s equal compassion for all when speaking about caring for all, even the Lost Sheep (18:10-14). But Jesus also teaches that we are not to think of forgiveness as cheap grace. In verses 15-20, Jesus speaks about the seriousnessof any violation. Additionally, verses 21-35 teach us how to deal gracefully with those who have violated us. In our lectionary Chapter 18:21-35, Jesus builds upon the lessons of grace by teaching forgiveness. Jesus also gives us a roadmap to freedom by illustrating God’s abundant forgiveness in mathematical terms. We learn that “a just forgiveness” brings justice and reconciliation to all for wrongdoing and offers a way of peace to the one who forgives.

**Conflicts at Play:**

The conflicts at play arise as Jesus teaches “a just forgiveness” that embraces God’s love for all, even those who have ‘lost’ their way. In doing so, Jesus strips away the notion that not all people matter. Jesus strips away the notion that there is a limit to God’s grace. Jesus also offers an example of “a just forgiveness” that strips away the notion that the person who harmed another has no accountability. Instead, Jesus teaches that “a just forgiveness” brings the forgiver a way of peace rewarded on Earth as it is in Heaven. Jesus then challenges the disciples to fully trust in God’s forgiving grace as a way of justice and peace for all people.

**The Way of Peace:**

In moral distress, Jesus focuses on the importance of “a just forgiveness.” This parable about the unforgiving servant exemplifies God’s forgiving grace that calls upon all people to reconcile with one another. Jesus uses two scenes to point out a spiritual truth about the value of God’s beloved community. In that, this story tells the Good News about the mathematics of God’s forgiving grace. As Jesus’s story explains God’s forgiveness towards us is infinite. In doing so, Jesus offers us two scenarios to address the moral mathematical question about the number of times someone should forgive another. The first scene shows us the abundant generosity of the king who forgave the servant who could not repay in a lifetime what he owed. But we see in the second scene that when the servant had an opportunity to return the favor of grace, he failed to do so. As a result, the community called the king to step in to offer justice, and the unforgiving servant lost his freedom.

In speaking to the disciples, Jesus illustrates in Matthew 18:21-35 that “a just forgiveness” is not easy. Jesus also speaks to the importance of our relationships with one another. Teaching that we first, should seek to understand at a deeper level how God has forgiven us. And secondly, pray for God to inspire us with grace so that we can forgive the person who has wronged us. For instance, when Peter asks Jesus how often to forgive someone (v. 21a). The parable that Jesus uses to illustrate forgiveness (vv. 23-35) is a story of two debtors whose plea for mercy constitutes a sort of repentance. The issue presented deals with those who repent for their wrongdoings. Rather than listening for Jesus’ answer, Peter proposes his own response by asking if someone should repent “seven times” (v. 21c). Since the rabbinical standard for asking forgiveness was three times (Amos 1-2), the thought was that God forgives the first three sins and punishes the fourth. So, Peter’s response was quite generous. But Jesus’ answer demolishes Peter’s generous response. Jesus replies with an even more generous number, which was seventy times seventy (v. 22). Jesus suggests that instead of having a math lesson, we should instead have a grace lesson. In this lesson, Jesus suggests that a way of peace should not come from careful arithmetic, but it should come from our hearts.

In Matthew 18:23-27, we hear of God’s invitation to restore peace by inviting all to forgive, seek freedom, and work toward reconciliation. As verse twenty-three says, **“Therefore, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a certain king, who wanted to reconcile accounts with his servants”** (v. 23). This is a kingdom parable. In kingdom parables, Jesus offers us a glimpse into a quite different world where God is king and reigns in our hearts. The following verse (v. 24) speaks to the debt of ten thousand talents owed, which was the largest Greek number. So, Jesus makes the point that this debt was unimaginably large and impossible to pay off (v. 25). The forgiveness of debts in this parable builds upon the forgiveness of debts taught to us in the Lord’s Prayer (6:12). As Jesus tells us that the servant pleads for the king’s forgiveness to eliminate his debt (v. 26). Then, we learn that the king offers compassion upon the indebted servant and offers him complete forgiveness of his debt along with his freedom (v. 27).

Jesus’ story also offers a way of dismantling unjust systems of oppression (18:28-30). In doing so, Jesus highlights that intentional relationships of reconciliation are a key factor in God’s appeal for the way of peace. For example, Jesus uses mathematics that equates forgiveness to freedom and peace. In this story, we learn that a hundred denarii debt is tiny compared with the ten thousand talent debt. But we also learn that the debt becomes significant when someone demands immediate payment. It is important to note that one hundred denarii represent a working wage for one hundred days (see Matthew 20:2, where a denarius is a day’s wages). **Moreover,** grabbing the debtor by the throat was a severe form of intimidation (v. 27-28). Ironically, the second debtor uses the same words that the first debtor used to persuade the king to give him a chance to repay the debt. However, there is a significant difference between the two scenarios. The first debtor had no chance of ever affording to repay his ten-thousand talent debt. But it is quite conceivable that the second debtor would be able to repay his hundred denarii debt. **But the servant has no patience nor any mercy for his debtor and sends him to jail (v. 30).**

The parable continues with Jesus speaking about God’s hope for humanity and for the church universal (18:31-35). As Jesus says, **“So, when his fellow servants saw what was done, they were exceedingly sorry” (v. 31).** Those who learned of the unjust actions of the unforgiving servant reported the injustice to the king (vv. 32-33). Thus, in verse thirty-four, Jesus illustrates the importance of “a just forgiveness” by placing the unforgiving servant to suffer eternally. God expects us to manifest at least a small portion of the grace we receive from God in our relationships, but warns that grace, while free to all, is not a cheap grace. God is asking for our forgiveness (v. 35).

So, Jesus makes clear that “a just forgiveness” does not let someone off the hook for their wrongdoing. Jesus also highlights the importance of forgiveness as it relates to being in a community and holding one another accountable for each one's actions. The parable also leads people of faith to repent for failures of the past and work to reconcile, forgive, and be more compassionate for the future we seek. By embracing “a just forgiveness,” Jesus teaches us that we can repair damaged relationships and move toward a way of peace. May it be so. Amen.