

## *Liberating Forgiveness*

Rev. Chris Ferguson

Guest Preacher

Bloor Street United Church

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost – September 11, 2011

*Chris and Susan Ferguson have been appointed by the Partners in Mission Unit of the United Church of Canada as Global Mission personnel to accompany the churches and people of Colombia in their work for Human Rights, Peace and Justice. Susan will be serving with the Methodist Church of Colombia as an assistant to the Bishop. Chris will be serving as the International Coordinator of the newly formed Ecumenical Accompaniment Program for Colombia. They will be living in Medellin. Their term is for 4 years with a time in Canada for mission interpretation after the second year.*

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**Text:** *Exodus 14:19-21*

The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them. It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel. And so the cloud was there with the darkness, and it lit up the night; one did not come near the other all night.

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided.

*Matthew 18:21-35*

Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.'

'For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to

be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe." Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow-slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?" And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.'

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*Susan Ferguson*

Good Morning! First I want to say how very happy Chris and I are to be invited to participate in the service today. When we went out on our last assignment in 2004 to work with the World Council of Churches programs in Israel Palestine, our commissioning service was held here at Bloor Street. And now since the beginning of 2011 we have been back in Canada on Home Assignment (a fancier term is "itineration") speaking to Conference meetings, Presbyteries, congregations and at community events organized by local churches. We have been all over B.C, Alberta, Eastern Ontario and Quebec, and in Nova Scotia, but it feels right that our last place to speak is Bloor Street!

In almost all the events we have spoken at we have had the responsibility and privilege to lift up the voice and the concerns of our United Church partners in Israel Palestine, in particular Palestinian Christians. So Chris has talked extensively about the powerful united message from all the historic churches in the Kairos Palestine document wherein they speak about what their faith tells them about their life under occupation and how they and we are called to act. We're glad to say that a study guide for Canadian churches has been completed as is now available to you all!

My role in these events has been to “put you in the picture”, primarily through my experience working as the Team Support staff for the Ecumenical Accompaniment Program for Palestine and Israel. I give examples of the work of the accompaniers, often relating that to the particular time: for example, talking about the yearly Palm Sunday entry into Jerusalem speaking at a church in Ottawa on Palm Sunday, or talking about the worries of an Israeli and a Palestinian mother at a workshop in Edmonton on Mother’s Day. Many of you here at Bloor Street have already heard the goals and challenges of the Ecumenical Accompaniment Program very eloquently described when the National Coordinator for Canada, our UCC colleague Patti Talbot, spoke here last October, so today I would just like to recount something very recent which draws together a number of themes:

We are assisting with preparations for a celebratory “launch” event next week for this Canadian Study Guide I mentioned (flyer advertisement is attached). We will be getting messages from the Kairos Palestine office in Jerusalem, from other Canadian and U.S. churches, from the World Council of Churches. We also want to have a message from someone who will use it in their own congregation. So we thought right away of one of our United Church Ecumenical Accompaniers, Diane Baker.

Diane works in Winnipeg as a counselor for adults with cognitive problems, and as a mediator in conflict situations. She has served and continues to serve the United Church in many functions, including heading national committees. Right now she is serving on an accompaniment team in the South Hebron Hills on the West Bank, where the farming villages are often attacked by people from the illegal Israeli settlements built on their land. So I sent her an e-mail to ask her about taping a YouTube message to be shown at the celebration. I had not heard back by 3:00 p.m./10:00 p.m. their time last Friday, and yet I know that this very efficient person should, by that time, be in the small house the team has in the village of Yatta, answering her e-mail before going to bed. They get up very early in this farming community. So of course I did what we all do these days when we are in a hurry, I called her cell phone.

She answered right away, but indeed she was not at home, but rather standing on a hillside in the darkness with one of her teammates, watching out for any signs of trouble below. You can read more about the worsening situation on Diane’s blog (<http://shalompaxsalaam.wordpress.com/>) but, very briefly, in advance of the vote which will be held at the U.N. later this month on recognition of Palestine as a state, the Israeli state imagines that the many non-violent demonstrations might turn violent.

So settlers, who already carry arms and use them with impunity, are being given more weapons, tear gas, and other items. Villages have been invaded, and word had come that this village where Diane was keeping watch would be next. So it is part of her job to be present, to record accurately what happens, to make sure the information gets out.

I could hear the wind blowing across the hillside over the phone, just as I remember it from times spent with Accompaniers on other hillsides when I visited them. And several times she had to pause to check on approaching headlights. But we had our conversation about YouTube, and messaging and the importance of her telling people about where she is, as well as about her church in Winnipeg.

Now Diane is a very dedicated person, but she is also a very ordinary, straightforward United Church member, doing what she can do, to serve and witness and work for change. And we are all connected with her in what she is doing, we are all part of the global church, called to act out our faith in many places.

(I suggest people might want to look at “Israel Palestine” page on the UCC website [www.united-church.ca](http://www.united-church.ca), in particular the new brochure [What We Can Do toward a Just Peace in Palestine and Israel](#) – just press the control key and click at the underlined title to take you to the document. [Printed copies of this sermon will have the document attached.]



110163 Kairos  
Palestine Ecum. Flyer

*Rev. Chris Ferguson*

Colombia has one of the largest internally displaced people’s populations in the world. And just in the last months flooding has caused over 2.5 million people to be further displaced. Violence against civilians in border areas has led up to 500,000 to flee the country in the last few months. Colombians and the Colombian churches are responding with courage to seek justice especially given raising persecution of the afro-Colombian population and indigenous populations faced with the excesses of extraction industries and land grabs.

Again, reflecting on the work we have done and the work we are about to do is dense with the hard news of tough times and tough contexts. You are already probably saying, well, I guess this sermon is not going to be a barrel of laughs! And yet, the scriptures are also dense with the power of God in history – liberating slaves, affirmations of God’s never-ending store of liberating love and debt slaves set free and strong words about never excluding brothers and sisters from the community even if it means 7 x 77 episodes of screw ups and transgressions.

Speaking more directly to our many dense contexts, the message is about liberation and freedom from slavery and bondage in real historical social terms. As a great shock the texts do not actually refer to FORGIVENESS in the inter-personal sense. What is being addressed is liberation from debt, slavery and oppressive social obligations. The Texts speak of Forgiveness from Debt that Liberates us and Liberating us from narrow concepts of Forgiveness. Interpersonal – emotional forgiveness is important but it is not what today’s texts are about. They point to the role we all have to play in the seemingly small things that mean freeing all of us from social injustice.

## I

The Contexts of both the OT [Old Testament] and NT [New Testament] texts are contexts of people living the violence and oppression of Empire – the Hebrew slaves under Pharaoh and the people of Palestine under the Roman Empire. So as we hear this message of Gods’ place in the human struggle for freedom, what is our context? Given that my last 25 years in ministry have been focused on the global context, I will not surprisingly go right there!

In a message to the WCC [World Council of Churches] Executive in 2009 Committee, Fr. Miguel D’Escoto Brockmann, said:

“Things could hardly be worse.” The vast majority of the world’s people are living in poverty. The majority are women and children. We all face the afflictions of the economic crisis, the global environmental crisis, the food crisis and the energy crisis. Militarism and oppression abound. As a world community we are in a sorry state. We are, in fact, morally decrepit as we allow this fundamentally evil state of affairs to continue.

In short, our dense and loaded world context is a situation where the lives and work of the many are exploited for the greed and benefit of a very few.

The spotlight on the unfairness and unacceptable state of our context shone through the recent outpouring of grief and mobilization of hope in action following Jack Layton's death. Frankly we all get it. Obviously we all have to get on with life and even though we live in a morally decrepit world marked by militarized systemic injustices – we seek to be as moral as we can be and don't really see how we can take on the whole burden to change the world.

## II

Which brings us to the text in the Gospel of Matthew.

The question of Peter about "Forgiveness" and the parable are nestled in chapter 18 as part of a section about the discipline and obligations of living in community dedicated to justice and God in the midst of a cruel and oppressive Imperial Occupation. Warren Carter in his most recent work suggests that Matthew's gospel is all about the Christian community after Jesus' crucifixion – struggle to, as he calls it, "negotiate" Empire. All should be read through the lens of a community that wants to continue to struggle for liberation and bring about God's kingdom on earth (as it is in Heaven) but still manage to survive and not be wiped out by the Romans. This is a basic, although not perfect, parallel to our collective dilemma today. In our case benefiting from the system that harshly exploits others and is destroying the earth, while feeling called to resist evil and seek justice.

The first part of text picks up the idea of how often "brothers and sisters" (here translated inaccurately as "church") should be excused or allowed to continue as members of the community even if they miss the mark and transgress and fail to follow the way of God's justice in a world ruled by Roman injustice. In fact, to follow Roman law in cases of debt and taxation was to violate the law of the covenant. Selling your family into slavery, as an awful example, was the legal solution for debt. This is totally inimical to God's law.

I re-frame the dialogue between Peter and Jesus this way, because rather shockingly the standard Biblical translations betray us and use the word "forgiveness" in this text which utterly distorts the meaning of the Greek.

There are several Greek words that can mean forgiveness but the word used here APHIEMI (A--Fe-A-Me) only means 'to forgive debts...but otherwise has a juridical sense in everyday classical and biblical Greek – to remit, to free from legal obligation – to divorce – to leave alone–. The sense would be “How often do I have to refrain from shunning or excluding brothers or sisters who mess up and in so doing violate God’s laws?”

The word for inter-personal pardon for personal offenses or injuries is a totally different word. So as important as the idea of grace and personal forgiveness by the victim to the victimizer might be...that has frankly nothing to do with what this text is speaking about. This text talks about forgiving financial debt and social transgression of the covenant between members of a community where to keep the law is to perpetrate injustice and to tear the community apart at the village level.

The translation problems extend to the translation of sin. Two quick points here in the Greek in this context, the Greek word “Harmatia” means to miss the Mark. To not fulfill one’s purpose. To transgress. But to be clear, in the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew chapter 6, the word translated by sin or trespasses only means one thing – DEBT – Financial Debt, the kind of debt that can lead to slavery. In the parable of the Wicked Servant, the word used to forgive debts is the word used in the Lords prayer and that is what it means.

The text liberates us from masking the real social obligations to radical social inclusion; to denounce the fragmentation and exclusion of unjust social systems. And it also frees us from the tyranny of an unsupported theology that lays guilt on survivors of abuse if they don’t forgive their abusers. Or re-victimizing victims. This is about not playing the exclusion game but to see every offense as an opportunity to re-build a shattered community. It is like the concept of restorative justice. Not impunity – not ignoring destructive actions...but working from below so that the justice seeking community does not play the same game as the oppressive system of injustice. We refuse to exclude and use power over others. We refuse to use the law to enforce injustice. Always – continually. The small action at the grassroots and family level of continually re-weaving the social fabric and refusing to allow economic relations and injustice to shape the way we live, even if that is the system in which we live, has liberating power. To get there we must liberate ourselves from believing that 7 x 77 is

about personal pardoning when it is about the constant engagement in radical social inclusion.

### III

This brings us to the second part of the text – the ferociously difficult “Parable of the Wicked Servant”. Again, “dense”, because at least two things are presented in one package – Matthew’s version and the original telling by Jesus.

I am sure I will not shock anyone here if I stress that the text we have here is an oral story from Jesus – written down later, then taken by Matthew and put into a new context, adding an introduction and a conclusion and making some changes in order to serve Matthew’s purpose. Nothing wrong with that but in order to deal with the message of the parable in Jesus’ ministry, we need to separate out the bits that Matthew has added. Remember how I said that Matthew is all about speaking to a community trying to “negotiate Empire”? In doing so, he needs to use a kind of code so he introduces the whole thing as if it is about the Kingdom of Heaven...he means the Kingdom of *God* but because that is loaded to suggest directly that God’s values, not Caesar’s, should prevail on earth...he uses K [Kingdom] of Heaven so that it “fuzzies” up the meaning and allows for a spiritualized interpretation – we know he doesn’t mean that when we read the Lord’s Prayer and when we read Matthew 25...about feeding the hungry and so on. He also connects it to Peter’s question of not excluding Brothers and Sisters and ends the whole deal with a reference that leads one to believe that the parable is an allegory wherein God equals the King. This code language covers up what NT [New Testament] scholars call the “hidden transcript” and what W. Herzog has proposed as the “subversive message of Jesus’ parables...”

To follow the usual way of reading the text as a message that we must forgive others as God has forgiven us, and must do it continually or God will punish us the first time we screw up with the harshest of treatment and torture is, frankly, nonsense. It contradicts all the fundamental understanding of God’s infinite forgiveness and love. We have to forgive but God would forgive us if we don’t. Needless to say the brightest minds in Biblical theology have all pointed out the impossibility of this way of reading the text but that hasn’t stopped generations of preachers pushing on to affirm the message despite the fact that if God is the King we are left with a harsh master who will forgive once and then punish eternally. Some scholars simply throw

up their hands and say...forget the details of the text no matter what the story actually says...the basic point is God is all forgiving and we should be too...

Herzog and others offer another way to read the text. Rather than seeing this as a theological story containing universal truths about God and Human Nature where the actual setting is in a Royal Court with severe rules, Herzog says this is a story that Jesus told to UNMASK the real life world of oppression. Jesus' story is all about the encoded message of the call to live humanly according to God's way in an inhuman situation governed by raw power, greed, competition and ruthlessness. Being human in a dog eat dog world.

This parable is not about God. It is about recognizing the systemic nature of injustice and evil and uses a hugely exaggerated story to shock readers into hearing that even if the Messianic King were to come tomorrow nothing would really change unless the system changes. And includes the fact they themselves now carry the system around inside them. They have internalized the system of injustice and help keep it in place by their actions.

Herzog gets to this place by saying...read this parable of an unimaginable debt met by a king with unimaginable power who then acts with totally unimaginable forgiveness. The messianic King. Just what we have all been waiting for. But then even though the King forgives, the others continue to act just as before. The King looks weak and stupid, so to keep power he comes back worse than before.

Herzog called this parable: "What if the Messiah Came and nothing Changed?"

Jesus told these harsh parables of real power relations to help people see the world of power and how it works, to see where they fit into the system. The idea was to lure people into seeing how they have internalized the system and to realize that hope does not lie in waiting for messianic hope or a popular king but looks towards combining change at the top with liberating forgiveness from below. Small choices made to live in just relations and to include and not compete, even while living in an oppressive system.

This brings us to the Exodus passage – a clear story of God’s liberation of slaves, seemingly an unabashed version of liberation from above. And yet Moses seems to play a key role – somewhat vague but he needed to hold out his arm and staff and so on for the waters to part. An ancient Jewish Midrash – a story about the story – presses the part about how hope is found in the human response to needed change from above. It is said that when Moses held out his arm and then lifted his staff, the sea did not part. His sister Miriam came up to him and said “Why is the sea not parting? The army is almost here.” Moses replied he didn’t know, but he was sure that God had said that if he came to the waters’ edge, lifted up his arms and so on the people could cross. Miriam and the women with her said, “Are you sure that is what God said.” And Moses said yes but look at how wild the water is...Miriam and the women said if that is what God wants...Let’s Go, and they strode right into the water. The minute their feet hit the water...the waters parted...the people escaped!

The parable and Jesus’ call to 7 X 77 and the exodus story always emphasize both the need to change the prevailing situation of repentance and the fact that small loving, repeated actions of subversion from below are necessary to create a new world. It will not happen from just above or just below. However, even in the most oppressive circumstance we can risk, like Miriam, to begin acting as if God’s way, and not the way of injustice, violence and Greed matter. And that, as unlikely as it seems, can change the world.

Jack Layton’s tragic death mobilizes hope. One man’s hunger strike in India brings down a system of corruption. Christian leaders in Palestine talk about not waiting for the world powers to change the injustice of the illegal occupation but they talk about resistance in the logic of love and use boycott and divestment to change the injustice non-violently and from below through everyday choices. What to buy and what not to buy in order to re-net the Palestinian social fabric and overcome hate and fear. An old Buddhist saying is “If you meet Buddha on the road kill him...” which is not a call to violence but a call to not seek change from the outside without also changing inside and how you relate to others in terms of social justice.

In the text from Matthew he puts this subversive message in the concrete context of a community being torn apart by the oppressive laws of debt slavery. 7 X 77 means keep re-building community. Don’t shun or exclude anyone – grow an ever expanding community of those who live by the way of justice...and that will change the world.

The message for us – to not allow divide and conquer, we are also negotiating “Empire”. D’Escoto called us all morally decrepit. Paulo Freire proposed that true morality is the capacity to be moved by the interests of the other.

That is subversive. The other is my brother or sister no matter what. In my daily dealings I will embody personal and social relations on the smallest scale that do not exclude or shun – I will not internalize or take as normal – greed, fear, competition or self interests. I will link arms with those afflicted economically, socially and politically. I see change must happen from above and I will make it happen from below.

Things could hardly be worse but these dense readings call us to social analysis to see our opportunity to live humanly and in so doing play a part in changing the world. Thanks be to God...7 x 77 times....