



# SAINT MARK'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*Saint Mark's Episcopal Church*

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I am the youngest of three sisters. We love each other very much, but growing up, I was probably a little bit of a pest. I would cry to tag along when my sisters went cruising with their teenage friends. I would hang out in the bathroom while they put on their super cool, 1970's, bright blue eye shadow. And I got away with things they never got away with – like at dinner, it drove them crazy that I did not have to eat my little green peas. On occasion, they probably would have liked to have thrown me in a pit and left me out for the wild animals, but it never went that far. We can't say the same for Joseph, though.

Remember the basic plot? Joseph's brothers plan to get rid of their annoying kid brother by throwing him into a deep hole and leaving him there with no water. And they do, but at the last minute, the brothers' change their minds, pull him out, and sell him into slavery. Not a much better fate.

Years later, when they come as immigrants to Egypt because of famine in their own land, Joseph meets them as the king's right-hand man. The brothers are terrified. And they should be, because if Joseph were operating under the usual bookkeeping economy of quid pro quo, of this-for-that, the brothers would have been thrown into jail or killed.

But instead, Joseph operates with God, in a different type of economy, in God's economy. He forgives them and talks Pharaoh into giving the brothers the best land in all Egypt.

This radical forgiveness is also at the heart of the Gospel parable we heard today. The king in the parable kind of reminds us of Joseph in the way that he forgives. The king wipes out his servant's ridiculously large debt, a debt that, had the servant worked his whole life, he could never have repaid. It was 10,000 years' worth of wages.

And yet it is here, at his lowest point, when he is in debt up to his ears, when has nothing to offer, and when he does nothing to deserve it, that he is forgiven. This parable suggests that God is simply not interested in that old, torturous bookkeeping economy. Instead, God invites the servant to an entirely different type of economy, to a new world of freedom and forgiveness.

This is radical. And being so radical, it is hard for the human brain to grasp the totality of what God is offering. God's economy runs so contrary to human institutions that it can be hard to accept. The characters in both of today's stories deal with this struggle.

You see, the story we heard of Joseph and his brothers today, where the brothers are bowing down before Joseph, occurs 17 years after they first came to Egypt. 17 years after the brothers meet Joseph and Pharaoh, after they are totally forgiven and given the best land in Egypt. And for these years, they operate as if they are still under the bookkeeping economy that keeps score, believing Joseph is eventually going to get them for what they did to him. For years, they have missed out on the joy of living in God's economy. So when they bow down before Joseph, they feel like they have to beg for pity, or try to strike a deal, or offer themselves as servants. They just don't get it. Their sins were forgiven years ago, but for 17 years, they have tortured themselves.

When they come before Joseph, a man who operates in God's economy, he stubbornly refuses to step back into their old system. He doesn't accept their deals or even acknowledge their precious guilt to which they have clung. Joseph just sits down and weeps. And so, the brothers weep, too. And in this beautiful moment, the brothers can finally hear God speaking to the deepest parts of their souls, whispering Divine forgiveness that has been there for them all along, and inviting them to finally step foot into the freedom of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Up until this moment, the brothers have shared the same malady as the servant in the Gospel parable. The servant's debt is also completely forgiven by the king, but he simply cannot step out of the bookkeeping world. Instead of walking away from the king as a free man, the servant is still bound in the system that enslaves him – and he turns on his fellow servant.

He just cannot seem to let the grace of the new system flow through him. In the end, instead of becoming free like Joseph's brothers, he remains tortured – not because God is a literal torturer (remember this is a parable) – but because the servant cannot leave the old economy that he knows and enter into God's economy. Instead of choosing the Kingdom of Heaven, he chooses the opposite.

Theologian Robert Capon talks about this choice. He says that “in heaven, there are only forgiven sinners. In hell, there are only forgiven sinners.” Jesus does not sort out on the cross who goes where. “The sole difference is that in heaven, the forgiveness is accepted and passed on, while in hell, it is rejected and blocked. In hell, the old life of bookkeeping is insisted on and becomes, forever, the pointless torture it always was.”

This is where Joseph's brothers lived for 17 years.

This is where the unforgiving servant lives, too.

And as we ponder the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven, we can ask ourselves, are we accepting the radical forgiveness of God's economy?

To be clear: we are not talking about the type of forgiveness that means one stays in harmful or abusive relationships, nor are we discussing policies for throwing open all the doors of all the prisons.

What we are talking about is spiritual healing and wholeness. We are talking about accepting that we are completely freed from the bookkeeping economy of having to pay for our sins when it comes to God. We are already reconciled to God before we ask. We are trying to imagine the beauty of a world where everything is already forgiven and reconciled.

When we start to glimpse this radical economy, we can finally hear God speaking to the deepest parts of our souls, whispering Divine forgiveness, and inviting us to finally step foot into the freedom of the Kingdom of Heaven. If this flows through us, everything starts to change.

We become freed from guilt's rigid self-enclosure. Boundaries between us begin to disintegrate. We see that we are all wrapped up together, that we are all forgiven sinners, none higher or lower than another.

Then, we get to participate in the ongoing, limitless activity of God's economy - which offers radical forgiveness for all.

And like Joseph and his brothers, when we stop keeping score, we get to find uncounted blessings.