

Year A, September 17, 2017
15 Pentecost (Proper 19)
Christ Church, Mexia

The Killing Fields is quite a movie. (You may have seen it.) It is the true story of a *New York Times* reporter who was working in Cambodia during a time of awful bloodshed. His closest assistant was a Cambodian who was later captured by the Marxist regime, the Khmer Rouge, a totalitarian group known for its torturous cruelty. What the Cambodian assistant endured while trying to find freedom is beyond belief.

"The plot of the story revolves around the assistant's escape from the bondage of that terrible regime. ... He runs from one tragic scene to another. On one occasion, while fleeing, he sinks into a bog only to discover it is a watery hellhole full of rotting flesh and human bones and skulls that foam to the top as he scrambles to climb out. ...

"Having endured the rigors of the jungle while being chased by his captors, he finally steps out into a clearing and looks down. To his utter amazement, he sees the Cambodian border." (Stuart Briscoe, *Spiritual Stamina*) He is free!

Now it may seem to be an unlikely story, an unlikely ending, given that the gospel reading today certainly seems to be focused on forgiveness. So, you may think it relates to the Old Testament lesson about the Egyptian Army being destroyed, drowned, while chasing after the Hebrews whom Pharaoh had released. That outcome resulted in their freedom.

Well, it really relates to both. You see, forgiveness is about freedom for both parties – the one who is forgiven and also the one who forgives. Of course, I am reminded of something C.S. Lewis is quoted as saying: "Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive." It is not easy.

The sentiment of Lewis relates somewhat to the parable Jesus told in our reading today. The King is settling his accounts, but a slave owed him ten thousand talents, a large sum, that he couldn't pay. And the King is prepared to take everything he has, including the slave and his family, to be sold in restitution of the debt. But the slave falls on his knees and asks for patience and the merciful King forgives his debt – just as God stands ready to do for us, to forgive us for everything.

However, when that slave is leaving he sees a neighbor who owes him a small sum, and he treats him harshly, ignores the neighbor's plea and has him imprisoned rather than forgive the debt.

"And forgive us our trespasses (debts), as we forgive (our debtors) those who trespass against us." We say it in every Eucharist, but it is hard to do. Living in this world as a follower of Christ is difficult, as Will Willimon notes: "If we or the world could be saved through human kindness or clear thinking, Jesus either would have formed a sensitivity group and urged us to share our feelings or would have founded a school and asked us to have discussions. But knowing the ways of God, the way of the world, and the persistence of human sin, he took up the cross, called disciples, gathered the church, and bade us follow him down a different path of freedom."

The emphasis is on freedom, and Colin Campbell observes that "(f)reedom does not mean the absence of constraints or moral absolutes. Suppose a skydiver at 10,000 feet announces to the rest of the group, 'I'm not using a parachute this time. I want freedom.'

The fact is that a skydiver is constrained by a greater law – the law of gravity. But when the skydiver chooses the 'constraint' of the parachute, she is free to enjoy the exhilaration.

God's moral laws act the same way: They restrain, but they are absolutely necessary to enjoy the exhilaration of real freedom."

So, don't we often think if we avoid the hard stuff – like forgiving someone whom we feel has truly wronged us – we are "free." But we aren't, we carry that grudge around with us like a chain or burden that weighs down on us. And several medical studies have shown that our physical health is improved when we forgive versus carrying that negative emotion around with us.

As I said last week, salvation can be ours now and it sets us free. Living in accordance with our Baptismal Vows may seem to constrain us, place a burden on us – but rather doing so sets us free! It is the world and the things of this world that enslave us.

St. Paul reminds us several times that he is a slave of Christ, But Jean de la Bruyere puts that in perspective. "The slave has but one master, the ambitious man (or woman) has as many as there are persons whose aid may contribute to the advancement of his (her) fortunes."

William James reminds us that our greatest inhibition is fear – fear for our own safety security and those of our loved ones; we worry about

what others think of us; we are afraid of departing from cultural norms or failing according to the rules of our man-made systems; and we fear death, among other things. Freedom from fear can liberate us. We don't need to fear God – Jesus said on many occasions, do not be afraid, have no fear. And as Marcus Borg tells us, "Lives deeply centered in God are marked by freedom and courage."

Choose freedom! Love God and love like God – forgive - and you will be freer than you have ever been.

In the name of the one God, the Creator, the Word, and the Spirit.

Amen.