

# The Big Bail-Out

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Exodus 14:19-31

Matthew 18:21-35

In a land far from here, in a time long ago, a sage was sitting under a tree, looking for all the world like anyone else taking a break in the heat of the day. No flowing toga, no saffron robe. Perhaps this was because the local authorities were out to catch the teacher, reputed to be a rebel or subversive, or even a would-be messiah. So it paid to keep moving and blend in, keep a low profile. You might have thought the wise one was just another poor local.

A disciple approached, and sat down close to the teacher in the shade. "I've got friend who's got a problem," quoth the student—who was, it seems, older than the teacher. "I could use some advice. My friend has a sister, who, well she IS the problem. Every time I—I mean my friend-- turns around, this sister is borrowing money. Often it is from the parents, who don't have any to spare. If she isn't borrowing money, she is mixing it up with other people. And then...my friend...has to bail her out. Ummmm. My friend wants to know, how many times should she forgive her sister. Seven?"

The teacher, looking sympathetic, said "How about seven times seven?" The disciple looked pained. "I thought you'd say something like that—preacher talk. But if it were YOUR sister..."

"I suppose" mused the teacher, squinting warily into the hot sun at some imperial soldiers lounging uncomfortably nearby, "we might compare the way God does business to the way government operates. Let me share a story with you. Suppose, just hypothetically, there was this banking crisis. The bankers, who had been lending out money as fast as they could at unbelievably low rates, with unbelievably high fees and mysteriously high payments, announced that they were about to go bankrupt. The whole empire was in shock. The house of cards was about to come down. The emperor, and the senators as well, did what all the business leaders said was absolutely necessary. Instead of tossing the rascals in jail, they arranged for huge loans from the tax-payers, billions upon billions of dollars—I mean tons of gold-- to bail out the bankers. The biggest bank scandal in history got the biggest bail-out ever. It might have been mercy, or it might have been not so enlightened self interest. Who knows. But it was a big bail-out. And then, as soon as the noise died down, the bankers started to foreclose on mortgages all over the place. They had the little homeowners who were losing their jobs because of the very crisis those bankers started—had them by their throats. Meanwhile the banks were paying a lot of money for a bunch of lobbyists to go and complain about too much regulation of their banks. Little people everywhere were becoming homeless, while those bankers were making out pretty nicely and trying with all their might to be able to keep their scams going. But then the emperor heard about it. "Is this how they repay our generosity?" Shortly thereafter a couple of obscure government agencies quietly announced they were going to sue those banks for mortgage fraud. Meanwhile, word on the street was that Imperial investigators were starting to rethink criminal charges. The good days were over."

The teacher paused. "God's more generous than any emperor. Those of us who have benefited from the *real* Big Bail-Out might want to bear that in mind when it comes to dealing with others—especially our own sisters and brothers. Take our cue from the emperor instead of the bankers."

The soldiers nearby were starting to look with interest in their direction. Without a word, teacher and student disappeared discreetly behind the tree into the bright sunlight on the far side. It was time to move on.

## II.

As we gather on the tenth anniversary of one of the most terrible days in the memory of this nation, we cannot pretend that the twin problems of justice and forgiveness are any easier now than they have ever been. To preach a message of forgiveness that ignores the reality of the suffering of little people all over this good earth would break faith with the very real Jesus whose disciples we seek to be. And yet to preach a message that mimics the angry sometimes merciless rhetoric of emperors and petty monarchs and ideologues would also break that faith.

Where were you on Tuesday September 11, 2001? At 8:30 I had arrived to visit with a dying woman in a nursing home in Rochester New York. As the towers descended while firefighters and police officers raced toward them, many to their deaths, I was sitting in a clergy bible study. By noon, I was summoned to the local mosque, where the telephone answering machine was full of messages spewing hate and venom at all Muslims—and unveiled threats of violence toward that local community. Jews, Christians and Muslims assembled there in that building to draft a common statement in response—a statement of grief and a condemnation of the violence, but to get in we had to get through the police cordon set up to protect the people inside the building. It had taken no time at all for the hatred to start. We shook with fear as we prepared to speak with one voice. When we stood on the steps of an Islamic Center in upstate New York a little later however, we all knew what needed to happen. “Today,” some one read, “we are all Christians, we are all Muslims, we are all Jews....”

In churches everywhere, we might just as soon ignore the memory of that day ten years ago today, in favor of an enthusiastic Launch Sunday, personal in emphasis, and apolitical in tone. And yet we cannot do that! We continue to grieve the almost three thousand dead of September 11 2001, and piled on to that grief is the grief we feel for all who have lost their lives, their homes and their homelands in the decade since—these number beyond number: who can count the dead civilians, the dislocated refugees, who can quantify the lost innocence? All these we grieve, if we have hearts left at all. And we would do well to grieve the ways in which vengeful anger has made us lesser people: grieve the bombs dropped in our name, the suspicion and prejudice to which we have been tempted; grieve the profits reaped by the unscrupulous in a time of war.

For a preacher on this day, the difficult question is this—how shall we take stock of tragedy and criminal violation a decade later, and take stock of what has become of us in the meantime, while at the same time encouraging a congregation to “launch” once more, on a journey of faith desperately in need of renewal?

The fact of the matter, for followers of Jesus, is that yes, we are called to a Launch! But we are not simply called to launch once again into an easy faith, false joy, or cheap grace. It has never been easy to practice forgiveness. It has never been easy to sort through justice and reconciliation. And yet as followers of Christ, we still insist on seeking reconciliation with all of humanity, including those closest to us, those with whom it is easiest to go into something like war. We still insist on noticing the nameless little people caught in the crossfire, collateral damage. We still insist that it is worthwhile assembling in the name of love, despite all the evidence that love is impractical, unrealistic. We still insist on launching out into the world, testifying with our lives to a different and more excellent way.

### III.

If a church were just a social club, or just a feel-good operation, I would tend to want to postpone the launch this year. But that isn't what we are or who we are. We are a community of people who follow a teacher from long ago who reminds us still that we are beneficiaries of a bail-out, a deliverance, a salvation, a liberation that it is not the place of kingdoms to give, nor within the power of any human being to take away. Christ calls us not simply to recite the stories of that bail-out, but rather to live it out with our own choices, our own actions, our own words and attitudes.

I remember listening to the radio on the morning of September 11, 2001. The reporter was describing how, as the crowd fled, New York City police officers were walking the opposite direction, proceeding toward the fire, trying to slow people a little, to keep a little order. And I remember thinking: “They are going in the wrong direction! They are going to die! What keeps them walking against the panic of that crowd instead of getting out of there?”

It is often also the job of people of faith to walk in the “Wrong Direction”, to face in towards the fires of history, to confront the forces of hate, armed only with what often feels like complete powerlessness and a seemingly quixotic sense of destiny. When we launch, we often must launch into what looks, for all the world, like the wrong direction.

What gives us the tenacity, the vision and the hope to conduct such a Launch? Perhaps it is nothing but the memory of a teacher long ago, reminding one disciple that we have already been bailed out, set free, given a chance to start over. So it is up to each of us, and up to us in communities together, to face the crowd, face the fire, and walk the love.