

Proper 18A, Matthew 18.10-20

September 6, 2026

The Rev. Scott Walters

Two rural white Christian southerners, for whom I had deep respect, died recently, within a week of each other. Even though all four of those descriptors apply to both of them, Dolly Parton and Wendell Berry, hardly could have been more different. Berry did his writing with a pencil, mostly in the daytime, using natural light, so he wouldn't burn electricity produced by strip-mined coal while he wrote against the practice. Dolly Parton was less concerned with staying natural. In her memoir, she wrote, "I have nips and tucks and trims and sucks ... eyes and chin and back again, pills and peels and other frills, and I'll never graduate from collagen." And yes, I did skip over the reference to her most famous enhancements in that quote. Kind of like the lectionary does with our Sunday scriptures sometimes.

On the surface at least, the venerable agrarian poet and farmer looked pretty different from the rhinestoned country music star. But today I hold them up together as examples of what it means to take the teachings of Jesus seriously. I call them Christians, not because they claimed the title for themselves. But because they each seemed to understand so clearly that the beating heart of the way of Jesus is the costly practice of forgiveness.

A piece of Wendell Berry's I return to regularly is a lecture he delivered to a group of seminarians. It's titled "The Burden of the Gospels." He asks two questions. The first is, if you had been living in Jesus's day, would you have followed him? Jesus has been too famous for too long, so Berry says maybe imagine walking past the local courthouse where there's a crowd listening to a guy named Joe Green. When you stop to listen to Mr. Green, you hear him say:

"Don't resist evil. If somebody slaps your right cheek, let him slap your left cheek too. Love your enemies. When people curse you, you must bless them. When people hate you, you must treat them kindly. When people mistrust you, you must pray for them. This is the way you must act if you want to be children of God." Would you follow him?

The second question is, since Jesus says "If you love me, keep my commandments," could you keep them even if it were exceedingly painful to do so? Berry then tells the true story of a Dutch Mennonite named Dirk Willems who'd been imprisoned for heresy in 1569. I told it in a forum on violence last year, but it's worth returning to. Dirk Willems escaped one winter's day, but when the "thief catcher" who was pursuing him across a frozen lake fell through the ice, Willems stopped and wondered what keeping Jesus's commandments required of him then and there. What was his Christian obligation to this particular enemy? So he reached down, and pulled his drowning pursuer out of the icy water. The pursuer who was still obliged to arrest him. Willems was brought to trial and sentenced to death by a "lingering fire."

Wendell Berry was truthful. He said he couldn't be sure he'd respond as Dirk Willems had in the ultimate situation. That gospel questions like these impinged on Berry's conscience makes clear, to this preacher at least, that Berry was nothing if not a Christian. As Dolly Parton once said, "Forgiveness is everything." I guess I'm the bearer of the bad news this morning that Dolly and Wendell may have been right. For followers of Jesus, forgiveness might just be everything.

Maybe I shouldn't have begun with such an extreme example of Christian forgiveness. Especially when today's gospel reading is Jesus at his most practical. He sounds more like Paul,

whose letters were filled with responses to actual conflicts among people he knew as much as they were with grand theological pronouncements. But don't you believe that there is a relationship between the person we hope to be in the ultimate situation, and the person we are becoming in our day to day lives?

Ardelle sometimes says Jesus was a psychotherapist. There may be no better evidence for her claim than the first line of our reading. "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone." Today we might say, "Don't triangulate!" The uncomfortable energy that stirs in you when you've been wronged should not be dissipated by griping to somebody else. It's an energy like pain that tells you something is wrong so you can attend to the wound. If you've ever bit your cheek after a visit to the dentist, before the Novocain wears off, you know the damage that numbing the pain can do. That's how triangulation works. Gossiping to a friend eases the discomfort, but it's dangerous. And it doesn't help the wound.

So, go first to the person who's wronged you, Jesus says. This is the costly work of forgiveness in its most basic form. Make the phone call. Don't simmer and stew. Have the conversation. Lay down your life for that friend in the small sense of laying down your moral superiority as the one who was wronged, and reconcile, if you can. This is the burden of the gospel. But it's a burden that really can lighten us, if we'll shoulder it.

Jesus then acknowledges that your reconciling efforts may not work. And as he plays out his method in widening concentric circles within the Christian community, he reminds us that what he is really calling us to do is not only to practice forgiveness as individuals. It's the formation of a community built on these basic gospel practices that he wants. Which is also why, after exhausting all the available options for reconciling, you may have to draw a boundary. A community of reconciliation, a community of radical hospitality and forgiveness, a community committed to the way of Jesus cannot abide abusive behavior. It cannot abide the ongoing refusal to be reconciled. It's just too central to what binds us together.

Although, even as Jesus is saying there may be a moment when you tell someone they cannot stay and continue in their abuse, did you notice what kinds of people he compares the outcast to? Treat them like a gentile and a tax collector. Any gentiles in the room today? Anybody remember what kinds of people Jesus kept getting in trouble for reaching out to, eating with, befriending? Tax collectors are at the top of the list. It seems like he's telling us that as soon as you have to protect the vulnerable in your community by casting someone out, that someone will become the first kind of outcasts he wants us to run after when we can.

I think Dolly was right. Forgiveness really is everything, it seems, to the way of Jesus. It's everything to a Christian community. Can you do it? Can we do it, as a congregation? As Calvary?

I've been dipping back into a podcast from 2019 called "Dolly Parton's America." It's remarkable. A journalist named Jad Abumrad created it. He grew up in Nashville, and his father was Dolly's physician for a time. Jad wanted to know how Dolly Parton could keep fans on the political left and the political right in a time of such deep division. Look around at one of her shows and you'll see church ladies and drag queens, old men in cowboy hats with children on their shoulders. Jad's a Lebanese American, and he's obsessed with her. What was her secret?

About five episodes in, Jad is talking to Dolly about a moment at the 2018 Emmys. The stars of "9 to 5" were reuniting to present an award. Jad asks Dolly about her visible discomfort when Jane Fonda and Lilly Tomlin go on a brief tirade aimed at President Trump, using a quote from the movie. At the ceremony, Dolly pulls the room back from partisan political rage with one of her self-effacing jokes about her own anatomy.

Jad says he assumed the joke was a shrewd business move for Dolly, since many of her fans had supported the president. But Dolly talked about how heartbroken she was that dinners with her own family were suddenly devolving into partisan shouting matches. And what she had really wanted to say that night at the Emmys was, "Why don't we pray for the president? Why don't we just pray for him?" "That messed with me," Jad said. He couldn't stop thinking about it and eventually realized this was a spiritual matter for Dolly, not a business one.

And suddenly, so much else that he'd been learning about her began to make sense when he realized Dolly refused to cast anybody out. She wouldn't cast queer folk out. This was the woman who once entered a Dolly Parton themed drag show and lost! She sang about her Tennessee mountain home and the rural life and people she loved, and also about immigrant deportees and misogynistic bosses and the plight of coal miners. But she wouldn't agree to be called a feminist, even in 2019, because she thought it implied she had a problem with men. And then there was Porter Wagoner.

You may know that Dolly's big break was in 1967 when she replaced Norma Jean as Porter's "pretty little gal," as he called his female sidekicks. But within a few years, Dolly was becoming a bigger star than her boss, and things began to sour. Footage of his attempts on the show to put her in her place are cringey just to listen to, much less watch. But Dolly held her own. Eventually she knew she couldn't stay in that toxic environment.

Porter was less than loving in his response. He slandered her and sued her for a million dollars she didn't have. Dolly paid him back over time. Years later, when Porter Wagoner had lost everything, Dolly didn't celebrate. She bought out the publishing company they had owned together and immediately gave it back to him so his kids would have something when he was gone. Hours before he died, she sat at his bedside and thanked him for giving her a chance. She told him she was sad about the hurt that had happened between them. But she loved him, and she forgave him. She forgave him everything.

Friends, there are teachings of Jesus that are difficult because they are confusing. But the burden at the heart of the gospel is heavy because it is so clear. Forgive, just as you have been forgiven. Be a community of such people. Practice the way of Jesus every day with everyone. If you must set a boundary to protect the vulnerable, run after the one you've cast out as soon as you possibly can.

I don't know what I'd do in the ultimate situation, or even at the bedside of a Porter Wagoner. I do know Jesus asks that we put his yoke upon us and bear the burden of his way every day of our lives. The good news being that his yoke of forgiveness is so much easier, and his burden of reconciliation is so much lighter, than the righteous indignation, the resentments, the anger and old hurts he asks us to let go of in exchange. Yes, his way is costly. But there have been people on this earth who have lived the gospel truth that all Jesus really asks us to give up are the heavy chains that bind us.