

## As Far as the East is From the West

Proper 19, Year A, Track 2, ECL. Psalm 103:(1-7), 8-13. Matthew 18:21-35. September 16, 2017. The Episcopal Shared Ministry of Our Saviour, Salem and Trinity, Alliance. The Rev'd Jerome H. (Kip) Colegrove.

When I was in my early teens, I experienced my first Bible study session. It was short, clear and memorable—therefore I have remembered it to this day. At a youth group meeting we read Psalm 103, the psalm we read in today's service, and the young man who was in charge directed our attention to verse 12: "As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our sins from us." "He" being, of course, God.

And the young man asked us, as I now ask you: How far *is* the east from the west? [Wait for an answer or two.] Right: the distance is infinite; you keep going around the globe in either direction, eastward or westward, but there is no end point.

What does that mean about how God deals with our sins? [Wait for a response or two.] Yes. Once God has dealt with our sins, they are more gone than we can measure or even imagine.

Now, this only happens if we *ask* God to deal with our sins—if we ask for forgiveness. And we should never try to take those forgiven sins back, so to speak. We may remember them to learn from them, but we should *not* consider them a present burden, an active diminishment of our lives, an axe hanging over our heads. Once God forgives, that's it.

Nevertheless, we had better learn from our history of sin, as God gives us the grace to understand it. Today's reading from Matthew's gospel shows us what happens when we don't learn that God's grace is not just for our personal relief and repair but for sharing with other people. In Jesus' parable, a man is forgiven a debt of ten thousand talents. That's ten thousand times a year's salary for a skilled professional—a huge amount of money—so much that it is like the distance of the east from the west in its mind-stretching extent. And what does he do but turn right around and abuse someone who owes him what is, by comparison, a teensy amount of money. A hundred denarii is a hundred times the standard day's wage for an ordinary laborer. Jesus is making a point about what we owe one another in response to the oceanic grace of God.

It is the worst kind of sin—the sin of vicious ingratitude—to turn right around and decline to be generous and forgiving as God is generous and forgiving, especially when you have a strong personal reason to know the sweet relief of God's grace. We are all called to bear witness to God's love as many times as it would take us steps to travel from the east to the west.