Weekly Bible Study
group – February 18, 2009

This week’s reading assignment: Matthew 19-23
Reflection by Bob Zurinsky, SPU Center for Worship

Do you remember group last week? We were reading through Matthew 17-18 together. At one point during the service, we had some time for prayer and reflection on the story of the unforgiving servant that Jesus tells in Matthew 18. Remember that story? A man owed the king 10,000 bags of gold, but he was broke and had no way to pay his debt. He fell on his face before the king and begged for mercy, and the king cancelled the debt. A little while later, that same man came across another person who owed him just a little bit of silver. He demanded his money. He gave no mercy. When the king found out about this, the man was thrown into prison.

Jesus was teaching his followers that we have been forgiven an immense debt, and we must now go out into the world and forgive others just like we've been forgiven. God demands this of us.

As we were laying in Upper Gwinn, silently reflecting on this passage, I suddenly had an epiphany. All of my life, I've heard the message that "we've been forgiven, and we must now forgive others." But somehow the full weight of this story never sunk in. I hear the word "forgive" and I think of saying I'm sorry, or I think of not holding it against a person when they've offended me. Let go of offenses, because God has said "you are forgiven" to me.

But it struck me that what Jesus was teaching his followers was SO MUCH more radical than this. He was saying that if we want to live as a part of his kingdom, as a part of the kingdom of God, we have to let go of our sense of entitlement completely. This is a story about living with open hands, about clinging to nothing as my own.

Don't think too small about this story...Jesus wasn't commanding us to say "I forgive you" when someone comes to us and says "I'm sorry." Jesus was commanding us to open up our hands and give away all that we have, all that we are, and expect nothing in return. I have no claim to my own money or possessions. Or life or health. Or happiness or aspirations. I am called to carry all these things with completely open hands, recognizing that I follow a master, a king, who gives everything freely. If I were to borrow 10,000 bags of gold, my God is the kind of king who would turn to me and say "You owe me nothing. Go in peace." And if I believe this good news, then it would be absolutely ridiculous to assume that I can demand or take anything at all from any other person in this world. All I have, I hold with open hands. Because I believe the promise that my God will one day reign on earth, and I will receive a body and a life and a love that cannot be touched by any mark of sin or death.

As you reflect on Matthew 19-23 this week, understand that the kind of kingdom life Jesus is calling us to is a life that seems absurd to the world around us. It is vulnerable and weak and poor sometimes. This is a kingdom where the king himself would choose to suffer and die for the sake of love. Absurd now. But in the coming kingdom of our Lord, it will be revealed that this is the only life that lasts!