

Pentecost 15A September 13 2020
Matthew 18:21-35
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth
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Grace and peace to you from our Loving Creator: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen. *Then Peter came and said to Jesus, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother who sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven!"* [my translation] Let's pray:

Peter doesn't understand the full implication of Jesus' life or his kingdom. He understands the need for forgiveness but tries to put a very human, self-justified limit on it.

For Jesus, forgiveness isn't something that's quantifiable [measurable]. Nor is it based on self-interest. Forgiveness is a quality; a way of being, a way of living, a way of loving, a way of relating, a way of thinking and seeing. It's essentially the way and life of Christ. To follow Christ, is to pursue this orientation as our way too. "I tell you, not up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven."

So does that mean we must forgive the drunk driver who strikes a pedestrian? The spouse who cheats? The businessman who swindles? The racist who vilifies? The bully who disempowers? The politician who rorts the system? The abusive parent? The greedy corporation? Even terrorists? Yes, as difficult as we find it in our hearts to do, Jesus urges us to forgive them all.

Every day, this puts us in a seemingly impossible situation. How can we forgive the atrocities perpetrated against humanity and us, personally, when we struggle with the memories, the images, the anger, the fear, the pain and losses? Saints, everything that goes on in the world, every harmful thought, word, and deed intersects with Jesus' teaching on and life of, forgiveness. Every day that we live, we stand at the crossroad where sin and forgiveness meet.

Think about the history of the world - the Holocaust and the atomic bomb, the Killing Fields of Cambodia, the genocides in Bosnia and Rwanda, racial discrimination, economic oppression, wars and torture in Afghanistan and Iraq. Look at your own lives and you will find broken promises, hurt feelings, betrayals, harsh words, physical, psychological, and emotional wounds. Still, beneath the pain, the wounds, the losses, and the memories, lies the question of forgiveness.

I believe that everyone is in favour of forgiveness, at least in principle. "Everyone," writes C.S. Lewis, "says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until there is something to forgive." [1] So, what do we do then? What do we do when someone sins against us and there is something to forgive?

Some will feel revenge surging through their veins. Some will run away from life and relationships. Some will be paralysed by the darkness. I'm not saying this to criticise or judge someone else, but as a confession of what I myself have done. I've done them all. I know how hard forgiveness can be. Like you, I struggle with it and sometimes avoid it. I also know that in doing so, I fail to follow the way of Christ. All of these things leave us stuck in the past, bound by the evil of others, and bereft of the best life God so eagerly desires for us.

Forgiveness is the only way forward. That doesn't mean we forget, condone, or approve of what was done. It doesn't mean we ignore or excuse cruelty or injustice. It means we are released from them. We let go of the thoughts and fantasies of revenge. We look to the future rather than the past. We try to see and love like Jesus. Forgiveness is a way in which our lives become attuned to God's life.

The obverse is to withhold forgiveness. The problem is that this puts us in the place of God, the ultimate judge to whom all are accountable (Romans 14:10, 12). It's fanciful to think that we are somehow equipped to balance the scales of justice. That's a soul crushing responsibility, as far from us as the east is from the west.

God's forgiveness and human forgiveness are innately intertwined. That's abundantly apparent in today's parable. The king forgives his slave an extraordinary amount. Ten thousand talents is roughly 200 000 years of work at the labourer's daily wage. It means there is no debt too large to forgive. This man, this debtor, was forgiven. That's what the kingdom of heaven is like. That's how God is. This same slave, however, refuses to forgive his fellow slave about three months' worth of income at the labourer's daily wage. Too often that's what the world is like. Often, it's how we are. By refusing to forgive, the slave loses his own forgiveness.

The dynamic of forgiveness shouldn't be news to us. We pray it every Sunday and hopefully, we pray it every day. "Forgive us our trespasses [sins] as we forgive those who trespass [sin] against us." We pray the Lord's Prayer with ease and familiarity but do we live it actively? Do we practise daily what we ask for? Not seven times, but seventy times seven.

That's a lot of forgiveness but the pain of the world, our nation, and individuals is great. We need to forgive as much for ourselves as for the one we forgive. Forgiving those who sin against us is the ointment that begins to heal our wounds. It may not change the one who hurt you but one thing I promise you is this: Your life will be more alive, more grace-filled, more whole, more Christ-like for having forgiven someone else.

Forgiveness takes the weight off our shoulders. Forgiveness allows us to breathe out all that pent-up tension and guilt. Forgiveness creates space for new life. Forgiveness is an act of hopefulness and resurrection for the one who forgives. It heals our soul and life. Forgiveness takes us out of darkness into light, from death to life. It disentangles us from someone else's evil. Forgiveness refuses to let our future be determined by the past. Forgiveness is the letting go of the thoughts, the hatred, the fear that fill us so that we might live and love more fully.

So how do we begin to forgive? There's no easy road to forgiveness so, please don't buy into, "Give everything to God. Just forgive and forget." Simplistic, trite comments only demean those who suffer and irritate the wound. Forgiving someone is hard work and it takes time. It's something we need to practice every day. Learning to forgive begins with recognising and being thankful that we have first been forgiven. We are the beneficiaries of Jesus' love from the cross. Hanging between two thieves he cried out, "Father, forgive them" (Luke 23:34). That's the cry of infinite forgiveness, a cry we're to echo in our own lives, our families, our communities, our work places, our parishes, everywhere we find ourselves day to day.

Forgiveness doesn't originate with us. It begins with God. That's what the slave who refused to forgive didn't understand. It wasn't about him. It's about God. We don't choose to forgive. We only choose to share the forgiveness we've already received. Then we choose again and again and again. Forgiveness is a life that we learn to embrace and make our way. Sometimes, however, we just can't. The pain is too much, the wound too raw, the memories too real. On those days, we choose to want to forgive. Then there are those days that all we can do is choose to want to want to forgive. Nevertheless, we choose because that's the choice Christ made for all of us, "Father, forgive them."

How many times must we forgive? How many times have you been hurt and suffered by the actions or words of someone else? How many times has anger or fear controlled you? How many times has the thought of revenge filled you? How many times have you shuddered at the sight, the name, or the memory of someone? How many times have you replayed arguments in your head? That's how many times you forgive. Each time we will ourselves to forgive someone, we move a step closer to Jesus. Then one day, in God's perfect way, we will meet, victims and perpetrators, as happy thieves in the Paradise of God, the Father of us all.

'Therefore, I tell you, _____, [your] sins, which were many, have been forgiven' (Luke 7:47).

_____, 'happy are [you] whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered' (Psalm 32:1).

'When Jesus saw [his] faith, he said to _____, "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven"' (Matthew 9:2).

_____, 'when he saw [your] faith, he said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven you"' (Luke 5:20).

To all you Saints bound for glory, 'In him [Jesus] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace' (Ephesians 1:7).

How many times shall we forgive? Not seven times, not even seventy times seven, but Jesus times. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

[1] Lewis, C.S., 1960. *Mere Christianity*, Macmillan, New York, 115.
