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Pentecost XIV & Holy Cross Day
September 14, 2025
Text: Matthew 18:21 – 35
Title: What's Changed?

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. When it comes to punishing criminals, our country has no harsher method than what is commonly referred to as capital punishment. It's the technical, antiseptic term for killing the person responsible for the crime. Whether you call it capital punishment or execution or killing the criminal, it's a constant source of debate today. There are many who believe that it is an immoral form of punishment because two wrongs don't make a right in their eyes. They believe that execution brings our society down to the level of the criminals, and that it is a worse punishment to put the person in jail for life so that they have to live with the mental regret of their actions. It always amazes me though that many of those same people who oppose capital punishment are also the same people who don't seem to have a problem letting criminals go free with little to no punishment. Of course, there are many who take the opposite view, and say that execution is a necessary form of punishment to deter others from committing such crimes. If a criminal is killed for the worst of crimes as determined by the laws of the land, then it will make others less likely to commit those same crimes because they don't want to die at the hands of the state.

In our society today, we are limited by the Constitution to not use any "cruel or unusual punishments" on criminals. Because of that, executions today are often done by lethal injection or poison gas. There was a time when the electric chair was the method of choice, but today there is only the possibility for its use in 7 states and then only by the condemned's choice or if lethal injection isn't available.

Throughout the course of human history, different cultures have devised many different methods of execution, some of which are still used today. Some of these methods were intended

to spare pain to the condemned person, such as the infamous guillotine. Other methods were intended to cause as much pain and suffering as possible to the condemned person, and that was one of the reasons that the Persians invented crucifixion about 800 years before the death of Jesus. The Romans perfected this particular method, and they reserved it to be used only on violent criminals, those guilty of high treason, hated enemies, deserters, slaves, and foreigners. Crucifixions continued to be used until Constantine, the first Christian ruler of the Roman Empire, abolished it in 337 AD.

Its one of the greatest ironies of history that a completely innocent man, Jesus, was executed by this method reserved for the worst of criminals, and then that the instrument of that execution, the cross, would become the primary symbol of the religion that Jesus began. For the near two thousand years of Christianity's existence, the cross has been used and celebrated as a symbol of Christ's victory over death and the grave. We use it to identify ourselves. We use it to decorate our homes and houses of worship. It's found in our artwork, and we even sing about it in our favorite hymns as we encourage one another to "Lift High the Cross."

With the cross, God turned things upside down. By the sacrifice of the Son of God for you, the shame and defeat of the cross is turned into victory and glory instead. With His death and resurrection, the shame and guilt of your sins are forgiven fully and completely. Because of Christ's innocent death on the cross, we who deserve to be condemned for our sins are promised and given life everlasting. This is the Holy Cross which we celebrate every September 14th, just three days after our country annually remembers the attacks on the World Trade Center and our Consulate in Benghazi on September 11th, and now four days after the assassination of conservative and Christian apologist, Charlie Kirk. The irony is that our celebration of the Holy Cross, which brings so many wonderful blessings to our world, is so close to these events of such great pain and suffering that cause people to wonder where God is.

For the first few weeks after the twin towers in New York collapsed, Christian churches throughout our country were filled with people and a surge of patriotism was seen everywhere. But by the time the first year had passed, the churches were back to their normal attendance, and by the time three years had passed in 2004 the surge of patriotism had drastically subsided. The country was back to politics as usual with another presidential election, and as we sit here today, you have to ask the question, what has really changed? Aside from the memories that we all have, is life really any different as a result of the 9/11 attacks? Are things better or worse?

That question can be answered in any number of ways depending on your perspective. But today it is from the Lord's perspective that we have to consider this question. Has anything really changed? Churches are back to the same attendance that they had, and in many cases have even declined in membership since then. And those of us who are still faithfully here in the Lord's house are faced with the reality that no, nothing really has changed, and that is both good and bad.

Today's sermon text is from Matthew 18 with the famous question from Peter, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" The number seven is for completion in the Scriptures, and Peter is sure that he has the right answer. Forgiving someone seven times would be hard, but do-able. But Jesus has something drastically different in mind. He replies, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven..."

Now Jesus doesn't mean that we should keep a ledger of how many times we have forgiven every person that we have contact with and when we reach 491 they should no longer be forgiven. The point that He is making here is that Christians are *never* supposed to have a limit to their forgiveness because there is no limit to the forgiveness that we receive from God for the countless sins that we commit against Him. As many times as God forgives us is how

often we should be willing to forgive those who sin against us. And then Jesus tells the parable of the unforgiving servant to illustrate His point.

The king confronts a servant who owes him a debt that would almost be impossible to accumulate, 10,000 talents was the equivalent of 200,000 *years* of standard wages. The servant begs for mercy, and the king actually has pity on him and forgives the debt! But no sooner has the servant left the king than he comes across another servant who owes him 100 days worth of wages. The servant choked the man who owed him money and demanded payment, and when he didn't get it, the servant had the man thrown into jail until he got his money. When the king heard about that, he was angry, of course, and had the unforgiving servant thrown into prison until all of his debt was paid. Given the incredible size of the debt, there is little hope left for the servant who did not forgive his colleague.

And that shows us where the lack of change from 9/11 has been a bad thing. How many of us would be willing to even consider forgiving the terrorists who committed this monstrous crime against our country, or how about forgiving the assassin who shot and killed Charlie Kirk in cold blood on Wednesday? In our sin we are not willing to forgive as God has forgiven us. That's one of the reasons that Jesus tells us to pray for that very thing in the Lord's Prayer. By the standard of anyone else in this country, those who kill or harm us have no right to be forgiven, but as Christians we are held to a different standard by the Lord. We are supposed to love our enemies, and the greatest love that we could show any enemy is to forgive them for what they have done. In the face of something like 9/11 or any number of other terrible attacks, it is certain that we fall far short of what our loving and forgiving Lord expects of us, or of what He Himself would do. Nothing has changed within us when we are not willing to forgive as our Lord wants us to.

Nothing has really changed, but there is also something good in that fact. In the face of the evils that have struck our country and now our fellow Christians, we have been able to find comfort, hope and peace in the only place where it can truly be found. We find it in the fact that God was not changed and will never be changed at all by that or any other evil. Our Synodical president, Pastor Matthew Harrison posted a statement on the 10th anniversary of 9/11. His words still ring true today, “Somehow, in an unfathomable way, the Lord's hand is not shortened and *His universe is still His*, despite the carnage of a few madmen. And like His very cross—which appeared senseless and pointless and an end of all hope—so this suffering is purposeful. ‘My strength is made perfect in weakness’ (2 Corinthians 12:9). At the last, we have one thing to say. One thing to hope. One thing to trust. And that is Christ crucified.” I couldn’t state it any better myself.

Forgiveness is bought and paid for by the cross of Christ which seemed so absurd to the people of His day. For the sake of the Christ and His cross, the Lord is willing to forgive whatever sins you commit. His mercy and love are for everyone, literally, and He calls each of us to show His love and forgiveness to everyone who needs to hear it. The world is longing for the Gospel message that God has given to His people. The crowded churches that we saw immediately after the events of the first 9/11 are proof that our neighbors are seeking something beyond themselves. The fear and pain that came out for so many at that time forced people everywhere to face the fact that they need something outside of themselves, and what they need is exactly what we have to offer them: they need real hope; they need to trust in something that won’t ever fail; and they need the peace, comfort, and forgiveness that can only come from Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.