

Nativity Lutheran Church
Palm Beach Gardens, FL
September 17, 2017

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Text: St. Matthew 18:21-35

Theme: Forgiven Forgivers.

In Nomine Jesu

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I'm wondering if you've ever asked ... or been asked ... this question? "How often should I forgive?" I won't press you to answer, but in our text Peter did: "How often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" And Jesus answered Peter, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."

Those familiar with an earlier translation of this text remember "seventy times seven" and might want to sidetrack us into a "which is really right" kind of debate. However you cut it – with seven being a perfect, unending number in scripture – seven, seventy, times or whatever. The point is clear. It's an unending number.

You see, forgiveness, for Jesus, is not a quantifiable activity. It's 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 is nothing less than the way of Christ. If we're to follow Christ then it has to become our way as well. "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."

Does that mean the drunk driver? Yes. The cheating spouse? Yes. The liar in our workplace? Yes. The racist? Yes. The rapist? Yes. The bully? Yes. The abusive parent? Yes. The greedy corporation? Yes. Even the terrorists among us? Yes.

And this week we stand at a difficult, seemingly impossible, place. We stand at the intersection of the anniversary of the September 11 horrific tragedy and today's gospel. Our memories, the images, the anger, the fear, the pain and losses all intersect with Jesus's teaching on forgiveness. Both are real. Both are true. The deeper truth, however, is that we would still be standing at the same intersection even if September 11 had never occurred. We stand at that place every day of our life.

Look at the history of our world and you will see the Holocaust, the Killing Fields of Cambodia, the genocides in Bosnia and Rwanda, racial discrimination, economic oppression, wars and torture that seem never to end. And look at our own lives and we'll find broken promises, hurt feelings, betrayals, harsh words, physical and emotional wounds. Each and every one of us could tell stories of being hurt or victimized by another. Beneath the pain, the wounds, the losses, and the memories lies the confounding question of forgiveness.

Now I'm guessing that everyone is in favor of forgiveness, at least in principle. "Every one," C.S. Lewis writes, "says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until there is something to

forgive.” What do we do then? What do we do when there is something to forgive?

Some can't help but strike back seeking revenge. Some will run away from life and relationships. Some will let the darkness paralyze them. I don't say that out of criticism or judgment of someone else but out of my own experience. I've done them all. I know how hard forgiveness can be. Like you I too struggle with it and often avoid it. I also know that none of those answers are the way of Christ. All of them leave us stuck in the past, tied to the evil of another, and bereft of the future God wants to give us.

Forgiveness is the only way forward. That doesn't mean we forget, condone, or approve of what was done. It most certainly does not mean we ignore or excuse cruelty or injustice. It means we are able to be released from them. We can let go of the thoughts and fantasies of revenge. We look to the future rather than the past. We try to see and love as God sees and loves. Forgiveness is one way in which we can align our life with God's life. But be careful! To withhold forgiveness is to put ourselves in the place of God, the ultimate judge to whom all are accountable. That's what our second reading today reminds us.

God's forgiveness and human forgiveness are integrally related. And that's more than apparent in today's parable. The king forgives his slave an extraordinary amount. Ten thousand talents is about 3000 years of work at the ordinary daily wage back then. It proclaims that there is

no debt too large to be forgiven. This man, this debtor, was forgiven. That's what the kingdom of heaven is like. That's how our God is.

But it's this same slave who refused to forgive his fellow slave 100 denarii, about three months of work in those days. And too often that's what our world is like. All too frequently, it's how we are. Jesus said that in that refusal the forgiven slave lost his own forgiveness.

Now now of this should be news to us. We know it well. We acknowledge and pray it every Sunday and I hope lots of us pray it every day. "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." We pray those words with ease and familiarity but do we truly live out that prayer? Do our actions support our request?

"Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." That's a lot of forgiveness, I'll grant you. But the pain of the world, our nation, and individuals is great. We need to forgive as much, maybe more, for ourselves as for the one we forgive. Forgiving those who trespass against us can be salve that begins to heal our own wounds. It may not change the one who hurt you but I promise you this. Your life will be more alive, more grace-filled, more whole, more God-like for having forgiven another.

What happens is that forgiveness creates space for new life. Forgiveness is an act of hopefulness and resurrection for the one who forgives. It's the healing of our soul and life. It takes us out of darkness into light, from death to life. It disentangles us from the evil of another. It's our

refusal to let our future be determined by the past. It's the letting go of the thoughts, the hatred, the fear that imprison us so that we are able to live and love again.

So how do we begin to forgive? Well, there's no easy road to forgiveness. Don't let anyone tell you, "Just give it up to God. Forgive and forget." Simplistic trite answers like those only demean those who suffer and pick at open wounds. Forgiving another takes time and work. It's something we've got to practice every day ... until it becomes our fundamental "spiritual muscle memory."

It begins with recognition and thanksgiving that we've been forgiven. We're the beneficiaries of the crucified one. Hanging between two thieves he prayed, "Father, forgive them." That's the cry of infinite forgiveness, and not just for two other dying men. It's a cry we are to echo in our own lives, in our families, our work places, our congregation, our day to day life.

And always remember that forgiveness doesn't originate in us. It begins with God. That's what the slave who refused to forgive didn't understand. It was not about him. It's about God. We don't choose to forgive. We only choose whether to share the forgiveness we've already received. Only then we choose again, and then again, and then yet again. For most of us forgiveness is a process that we live into ... like muscle memory in a good golf swing.

But sometimes we just can't. The pain is too great, the wound too raw, the memories too real. On those days we

choose to want to forgive. Somedays we choose to want to want to forgive. And then there are those days that all we can do is choose to want ... to want to ... want to forgive. But we struggle to choose it because that's the choice Christ made.

And how many times must we choose to forgive? Well, tell me this. How many times have you been hurt and have suffered by the actions or words of another? 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 another? How many times have you replayed in your head the unresolved argument with another?

Well, that's how many times you choose. And with each choosing we move a step closer to forgiveness. Then one day, God willing, we will meet, victims and perpetrators, as happy thieves in the Paradise of God, the Father of us all.

"Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."

In the name of the Father and of the +Son and of the Holy Spirit.

AMEN.

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Soli Deo Gloria