

Lutheran Church of the Epiphany, Hempstead, New York
Grace Lutheran Church, Uniondale, New York
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Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost ~ Proper 19A – September 13, 2020
Genesis 50:15-21, Psalm 103:1-13, Romans 14:1-12, Matthew 18:25-35

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. C: AMEN

Someone once said that there are probably really only seven or eight basic themes for sermons. If that is true, forgiveness has to be one of those themes.

Jesus often speaks about forgiveness, and he does so as strongly as he does about anything else. Forgiveness is at the center of the Lord's Prayer: forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Forgiveness is central to so many parables and stories Jesus told during his public ministry.

In the last several weeks, we have been considering Jesus' teachings about how to live together as God's people. As we pick up with today's Gospel text, he has just given instructions about what to do when you have a conflict with someone. You go and you speak plainly with them, striving for restoration and community. And then Peter asks Jesus, "So, if someone sins against me, how many times must I forgive? Seven times?"

Peter knows that forgiveness is part of the faithful life. Indeed, forgiving seven times seems quite extravagant. His faith tradition was that forgiveness of a person was called for three times – no more. So surely, seven times would be enough – enough faith and love, enough forgiveness to please God.

But Jesus says, "NOT seven times, but seventy-seven times," which is a way of saying forgiveness is absolutely essential to the faithful life, and even calculating it, trying to count it, to keep track how many times you've forgiven everyone is not what faithful people should be doing. Forgiveness is meant to be our way of life. Disciples forgive and forgive and forgive. That is Jesus' strong and continuous message.

Most of us accept the premise – one that is supremely important to Jesus – that Christians should forgive. What we struggle with is how to practice it.

How do we move from where we often find ourselves, hurt, angry, victimized, abused, alienated, to the place we say, "I am more than that? God calls me to more than that." How do we get our minds and hearts from thoughts of anger and hurt

and revenge to feeling and sending sincere forgiveness from our hearts? That is what Jesus is calling us to.

In order to move us from that place where we often find ourselves after being sinned against to where we are called to be – practicing boundless forgiveness – Jesus tells the parable about the forgiving king and his unforgiving servant. This story is filled with exaggerated circumstances in order to make Jesus' points.

Could a king be so extremely generous as to forgive massive debt from a lowly slave? If we do the calculation, it comes out to the value of 175,000 years' worth of wages for a day laborer. This was a debt that couldn't be repaid in a worker's lifetime. Well, the point is clear: that is how much God forgives each of us.

Could a slave, forgiven so extravagantly, then be so harsh with a fellow slave who owed him a small amount? By then-current values, the debt was about three or four months' worth of day wages. Could someone actually walk out of the king's palace on a road paved by freedom and grace and then act with such cruelty to a fellow slave in debt? The hyperbole makes the point. In fact, that is how we will wind up if we do not forgive.

Jesus uses two tools to motivate here. There is grateful response. God forgives so much; we are called to forgive. Goodness tends to lead to goodness. Grace tends to evoke gratitude and then more grace from us. But it does not always happen like that. So there is another motivator: punishment. When the slave fails to respond to generous forgiveness, he is sentenced with torture. And Jesus concludes: "So my Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive."

Now, I want to take a minute to say that I don't think that God is telling us in this parable, that if we don't forgive others that God will torture us for the rest of our lives. No, I think that the warning in Jesus' words is that, if we fail to forgive others and carry the hurt, resentment, anger, etc. in ourselves, all of those negative emotions will torture us, make us ill, maybe even kill us. It might make us wish we were dead. Maybe you've heard the old saying about anger and hatred: To nurture our anger and hatred is like drinking poison hoping that it will kill the other person. And yet all it does is kill us and separate us from God's love. That's what I mean.

Which motivator speaks to you? Some of us are moved by positive news that calls forth our very best toward the kingdom of God. In Jesus' story, we have been given immense grace just like the king's slave. But some of us are motivated by fear and punishment: look, forgiveness is central to life, and if we like the idea, but fail to offer forgiveness from our hearts and lives as disciples, well, we can expect

torture and suffering. Jesus wants to motivate us to faithful lives as disciples--lives that actually practice forgiveness--not sometimes, not seven times, but always and endlessly. What Jesus wants is "forgiveness from our hearts." Not ideas like, "Well, I can forgive, but I won't forget." That is not forgiveness from the heart. Or if we say, "I know I am supposed to love him, but that doesn't mean I have to like him." Well, that's not forgiveness from the heart, either.

Maybe we can find our way toward forgiveness from the heart in this way.

First, we always have to remember the context in which we live. We have to remember that we belong to God. God's love covers us. God's grace and forgiveness form the backdrop of everything about our lives. We remember all that God gives us and we remember what Jesus expects of us: forgiveness that is central to life. Some call this "remembering rightly." (Volf, Miroslav, *The End of Memory--Remembering Rightly in a Violent World*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2006.)

What we tend to remember is the wrong that was done to us. What we tend to remember is the hurt we feel or the betrayal that we experienced. We tend to remember how we were victims of the wrong done to us. And when we remember only those things, we start signing on to the ways of the world, not those of God. When we remember only the evil that was done to us, we don't move toward redemption and discipleship. We don't participate in the emerging reign of God. We're mired in the struggling world that Jesus came to redeem.

Jesus calls us to another kind of remembering: the larger realm of God, the grace that covers us and sustains us. Forgiven so extravagantly, we are to be people who forgive. This is not just a good idea. This is to be our way of life.

Second, we have to work at changing our thinking and our feelings. When we find ourselves feeling betrayed, angry, hurt or abused, our tendency is to react rather than to respond. We tend to be full of vengeance and aggression instead of forgiveness; to hold grudges instead of living with grace.

Jesus encourages us not to just react with aggressive thoughts and negative feelings. Jesus encourages us to respond in such a way that another, faithful, moral fabric emerges, a new realm takes shape. The cycle of evil and hatred is broken by love and forgiveness. The cycle of revenge and abuse is broken by new thoughts and feelings that actually free us for life closer to God's heart.

To forgive does not mean we condone what was done to us. To forgive does not mean we acquiesce or deny justice. To forgive means to refuse to let what

happened destroy us and alienate us from God and from one another. It demands hard work and vigilance, but it is the way to life and discipleship and to God.

Jesus invites us to "forgive from our hearts." May we walk in the path that takes us there, as faithful disciples.

Let us pray. O Lord, to turn from you is to fall; to turn to you is to rise; to stand and serve you--with love and forgiveness--that is to abide forever. In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. **C: Amen**