

Pentecost 15, 9.13.2020

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Genesis 50:15-21; Psalm 103:1-13; Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35

“Forgive from your heart”

Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Good morning. Thank you for joining us online for worship at St. Mark’s Lutheran Church!

Do you think of yourself as a forgiving person? All of us would certainly like to hope that we are forgiving people. Yet how many times have we said, “I forgive you,” only to carry a grudge in our hearts against that person for years. We say we forgive, but often we don’t forget. We say we forgive, but often we never fully release others from their debt to us. We may even remind them, on occasion, of our generosity to them and their debt to us. When we do so, we have not really forgiven them at all, but have kept them and ourselves captive to anger, hurt, and judgment. We all do this as human beings, and it is a reminder of how hard it is to truly forgive from the heart. Jesus reminds us today that we are to forgive from our heart, and move to the new place God is creating in our relationships with God and others.

In today’s gospel Peter asks Jesus, “*Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?*” Jesus said to him, “*Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.*” Like the phrase, “enough is enough,” Peter was really asking if there are limits to the grace of forgiveness. Though we think we are forgiving, often we decide the value of the sin, and the payment needed to earn forgiveness. Though we desire forgiveness for ourselves, we often we have difficulty in forgiving others.

Knowing our human frailty, Jesus tells “the parable of the unforgiving servant.” Jesus says the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When the king began to settle the accounts of his servants, the person who owed the most, 10,000 talents, was brought to him. 10,000 talents was a massive debt. In order to understand the size of this debt, it is important to do a little historical currency exchange. 1 talent was equivalent to 100 denarii, and 1 denarius was the equivalent of one day’s wage. So if we attempt to translate this into numbers we can understand, the U.S. Federal minimum wage is \$7.25 an hour, and an 8 hour day would be \$58.00. So 1 denarius is equivalent to \$58.00 in contemporary U.S. currency, and 100 denarii is equivalent to \$5800, the value of 1 talent. In the parable, the slave owed the king 10,000 talents. So 10,000 talents would be equal to \$58 million dollars. For comparison, if we examine ancient historical records, King Herod’s annual income was only 900 talents, or about \$5.2 million. The tax

on the entire region of Galilee was only 200 talents or \$1.2 million.

So the man at the top of the king's list owed the king 10,000 talents, or the modern equivalent of \$58 million dollars! Perhaps this helps us understand why the man fell on his knees saying, "*Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.*" This also gives us perspective on the amount of compassion the king had for the slave: "*And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.*" The king, of course, knew that the slave could never repay such a large debt.

Jesus told Peter and the disciples this parable in order to describe the kingdom of heaven. Jesus is illustrating our debt to God as totally beyond our means to repay it. Jesus is talking about both God's kingdom, and our human response at having been forgiven by God. When we realize the massive size of our debt to God, we realize that we are wholly incapable of repaying it. We realize that no amount of good works can repay our burden of sin and our need for forgiveness. It might as well be \$58 million, because we can't forgive our debt before God. Only God can forgive that debt.

Yet, of course, the parable didn't end there. Jesus went on to describe a person, who having been forgiven by the king, was unable to forgive others. Jesus said, "*But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.'*" Even though the other person pleaded with him for more time, he refused and had him thrown into prison. 100 denarii, or \$5800, is a significant debt, but not impossible to repay.

Jesus is attempting to teach us about the grace of forgiveness. If God has forgiven us the massive debt we owe to God, then we must forgive our neighbors those smaller more human sized debts they owe to us. Forgiveness is the most profound aspect of God's reconciling grace. Forgiveness is grace because it is completely unearned. Jesus was describing God's kingdom of grace and forgiveness. God's forgiveness is profound because we can do nothing to earn it. We can only with empty hands accept it and in return open our hands to share this forgiveness with others.

So it is appropriate that today is also "God's Work, Our Hands" Sunday. Today we join our hands with other ELCA churches in loving service toward the world. In contrast to the unforgiving servant who used his hands to seize another by the throat, we open our forgiven hands to embrace others in forgiveness, to accept others who are different, and to give to others from our blessings.

Every Sunday we begin worship with confession and forgiveness. We begin worship in this way not because we haven't already been forgiven, but because we need to stand before God and one

another with empty hands, remembering both the burden of our sin and the precious gift of God's grace. It is good for our soul to remind ourselves before God and one another that it is we who are in need of God's compassion, mercy, and grace. Confessing our sin is a reminder that we are all indebted to both God and to one another.

This is still somewhat abstract, however. How does the grace of forgiveness impact our life together as a church and as individuals? After all, Peter's question was about forgiveness in the church. Paul's letter to the Romans is a reminder of the clashes and differences of opinion that can occur in the church. Human beings have different personalities and different opinions about things. We are each wired a bit differently. Paul tells the church in Rome "*Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions.*" Paul was addressing differing views over Jewish dietary laws and ancient dietary customs. In the early church, some Christians believed they had been set free in Christ to live only by the law of grace, forgiveness, and love. Others believed that they still needed to fulfill the Mosaic law in all of its fullness, or continue to follow their ancient cultural dietary customs.

Paul makes it clear that God has welcomed all people whether they believe the food laws are irrelevant or whether they believe they must follow those laws to the letter. Paul makes it clear that we have been freed by God's grace and no longer need to rely upon works to relieve the burden of our debt to God. God's grace is so profound that those who seek to follow the law are also still liberated by grace. Paul writes, "*Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them.*" That's the thing about the grace of forgiveness in God's kingdom: it does not depend upon our ability, only upon an open heart ready to receive God's grace. Do we have hearts ready to accept God's forgiveness and ready to forgive others?

Paul writes, "*Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall.*" In other words, each of us are first accountable to God. If we experience differences of opinion - perhaps not about ancient dietary customs - but about the pressing issues and problems of our own day, then we also hold those views in accountability before God. We do not pass judgment on one another, but rather, we forgive one another and are tolerant of one another's views. Paul reminds us that rather than judging one another, we are to be tolerant of one another as God has been tolerant and forgiving toward us.

Both Jesus and Paul remind us that we judge others at our own peril, and to consider that we may

also be mistaken in our own views, and in our view of our neighbor. We withhold forgiveness at our own peril. If we truly experience God's grace of forgiveness, we are compelled to live lives of forgiveness for others. God's grace frees us to live life in a new way: to live compassionately for others. Jesus' parable also ends with the king saying to the unforgiving servant, "*Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?*" Jesus asks us to forgive our sisters and brothers from the heart. It's the same thing Paul told the church at Rome, "*Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.*"

The reading from Genesis about Joseph forgiving his brothers is one of the most poignant stories in scripture. Joseph had every right to express anger and vengeance toward his brothers who had sold him into slavery, yet he forgave them saying, "*Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God?*"

In the Lord's Prayer, we pray, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors," and in another translation, "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." Jesus has taught us to pray for forgiveness based upon our forgiveness of others. We are constantly trespassing upon one another in our lives, be it in action, in opinion, in our views. Daily, in thought, word, and deed we trespass upon God and upon neighbor. Jesus, Paul, and Joseph remind us that we stand before a forgiving God, who asks that we live with forgiveness and tolerance toward one another.

10,000 talents - \$58 million – is a lot of personal debt. At the end of our lives how much indebtedness will we carry before our God and king when he sits down to reckon our accounts? How much will a lifetime of unforgiving behavior toward others cost us?

Jesus has promised us that when we kneel in prayer asking our Father in heaven for forgiveness, God forgives us our debts, our trespasses, our sins. God's mercy forgives the massive burden of our debt, so that we might open our hands to embrace, accept and forgive others from our heart. God's forgiveness frees us, liberates us, so that we might also freely forgive the debts of others. We have been set free so that we might set others free to live new lives with hope and joy. Amen.