

9.17.2023 Time after Pentecost, 16

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Genesis 50:15-21; Psalm 103:8-13; Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35

“Forgive from the heart”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Forgiving from the heart is not always easy, and yet this is just what Jesus commands us to do in today’s gospel. Jesus’ words to Peter about forgiving, not seven times, but “seventy-seven times,” are meant to remind us of God’s ongoing forgiveness for each of us. Over and over, God listens to our confessions and prayers, forgiving us the debts of our mistakes and sins. Over and over, “seventy times seven,” God continually forgives us. Yet though we expect God to be forgiving and merciful, we don’t always reciprocate. We may say we are sorry to others, but we may also continue to harbor anger and resentment in our hearts.

The theme of forgiveness runs throughout each of the gospels. Indeed, forgiveness is at the center of how Jesus teaches us to pray – *“forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.”* After teaching his disciples this prayer, Jesus continued, *“For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses”* (Mt. 6:14-15). This theme of reciprocity, of forgiving as we have been forgiven, is central to the way God works. In Jesus’ parable, reciprocity of forgiveness is not considered a bonus, but rather, it is the baseline for all our relationships with others.

This theme, stated so clearly in the gospels, hardly seems necessary to preach about it. And yet, we know from experience how hard it is to forgive as we have been forgiven. We also know how easy it is to judge others while conveniently forgetting our own faults. These words encourage us to forgive one another so that we might move healed with grace into the future together.

I think this is why Martin Luther very nearly made forgiveness a sacrament alongside of baptism and the Eucharist. For Luther, the key to the sacraments are their institution by Jesus. As with baptism and the Eucharist, forgiving our neighbor as God has forgiven us is a command spoken by Jesus again and again. It is mirrored by Jesus’ commandment to love one another as he has loved us. For Luther, the single *sacramentum* or mystery that the sacraments represent is none other than Jesus Christ himself. Though there are two sacraments, Luther called baptism, the Eucharist and forgiveness, the three “sacramental signs” by which we are to live as Christians.

This helps us understand the reality of living sacramentally, because forgiving others from the

heart is the heart of the matter. Living sacramentally means living out the grace and forgiveness we have experienced in baptism and the Eucharist – it means living each day with forgiveness at the center.

Notice how Jesus set this parable about forgiveness within the daily marketplace. The parable of the unmerciful slave takes place within the everyday of economic interaction between people. This is what is meant by the reciprocity of the economy of God's household. Just as we have been forgiven our debts, we are to forgive the debts of others. We are to be merciful as we have received mercy and to forgive as we have been forgiven.

If Jesus' response to Peter's question made forgiveness an everyday matter, today's reading from Romans also places tolerance at the center of our daily lives with one another. These two readings remind us that reciprocity is the deep connection between forgiveness and judgement.

I have seen it time and time again as a pastor: those who are more conservative in their approach to the law of God can also be judgmental about those who appear more liberal in their faith. In like manner, those who appear more liberal can also look down upon those who seem more conservative in their faith.

Like Jesus, what is at stake for Paul is that each person is to remember that they and their neighbor each stand alone before God who judges according to our hearts. If our hearts have been forgiving and tolerant of others, faith allows us to stand with confidence before God. We are to forgive while entrusting the judgement of others to God's mercy.

Each week in worship we live into our baptisms trusting that we have been forgiven in the name of Jesus. In confession and forgiveness, we are reconciled to God and to one another – receiving the assurance of the forgiveness given at baptism. Each week in the Eucharist, we are fed and forgiven at the Lord's table, and we are sent out into the marketplace of the everyday to live into the promises of baptism and the Eucharist, forgiving others as we have been forgiven. This is what Paul means when he writes, "*If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord.*" All our daily living and our dying are a participation in the life and death of Christ, who accompanies us with mercy and forgiveness.

In every instance of our lives, God gives pardon, providing us with grace so that we can forgive others with the grace we have received. Grace, forgiveness, and mercy are given to us so that we might be living signs of God's grace for our neighbor. God's grace encourages us to see the economy of God's household, the economy of God's love for this world as something we always

participate in. Living sacramentally means forgiving the debts of others by sharing the grace we have received from God.

Every week begins anew on Sunday morning as we are recreated and made into a new community, Christ's forgiven body, the church. As Jesus forgave his disciples for their abandonment and denial of him, Christ also forgives our sins of neglect and indifference to our neighbor. On Sunday, the starting line of each week, forgiveness reminds us of God's ongoing creation in each of us.

Again today, Christ forgives us our sins and faults so that fed and forgiven, we might be sent again into the marketplace of life, into the economy of human relationships to live out God's economy of mercy, forgiveness, and tolerance.

Is there someone whose debt you have not forgiven? Is there some past event you are unable to let go of? Is there some judgment you have continued to pass upon someone years later? Forgiveness is not only about my own personal redemption; it is about freeing my neighbor from the bondage of my judgment. Forgiveness recreates both me and my neighbor, giving us both a new future together.

We each have a debt that we can never repay: Jesus Christ has already forgiven our sins. You have been forgiven to live as a sacramental sign in this world that God's love overcomes all debts. Judge not and forgive from the heart – for we all stand before God – and God judges us with love and mercy.

Forgive from the heart – over and over it is how God recreates a new heart in you and in your neighbor. Amen.