**St. Paul’s Lutheran Church  
Wildwood, Missouri**

**The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

**Matthew 18:21-35**

**September 6, 2020**

Why is it so hard for us to forgive someone who has hurt us? I mean really forgive; not just cut them out of our lives in the hope that eventually we’ll just forget about them. I mean forgive in the truest sense of the word; holding no grudges or desire for retribution. It’s tough to do.

Psychologists argue that forgiving those who have harmed us is difficult because we are hardwired not to forgive by evolution. According to them it is a survival mechanism that kicks in when we are hurt. They see it as a reflex; the emotional equivalent of jerking back your hand when you touch something hot. We’ve been burned by someone and we simply don’t want to get burned again. To forgive someone might place you in jeopardy of being hurt again, so, we withhold forgiveness to protect ourselves.

There might be some truth in that. Not in the evolution part but I do believe we are hardwired to withhold forgiveness. However, I don’t make my assessment from a psychological viewpoint; I do so from a theological viewpoint. We are sinners all of us and as such, sin, our own sin, impedes our ability to forgive. It has distorted our understanding of forgiveness as our pride, our desire not to be taken advantage of, or our desire for justice cloud our thinking. Consequently, forgiving someone who has harmed or hurt us does not come naturally. One would think that being sinners ourselves would make us a bit more empathetic. Who here has not sinned against someone else and sought forgiveness? If anything, being sinners ourselves should make us more understanding. It doesn’t though. Isn’t it amazing how quickly we forget our own sin when someone has sinned against us?

The truth of the matter is that sin totally distorts our view of forgiveness. We see that in our gospel lesson for today from Matthew as Peter wrestles with the whole concept of forgiveness and where the limits are regarding his responsibility to forgive. That really is the subject of our Gospel lesson for today from Matthew. Peter is trying to quantify forgiveness and find where exactly the limits of forgiveness are. However, there is something really important we need to understand here: this is a lesson addressed to Christians. It is a lesson given to those who have been invited to live under the gracious reign of God. It is a lesson for you and me. Is there ever a time when we can say to someone who has sinned against us, *“Enough is enough! No more forgiveness for you?”* That is really the point of Peter’s question to Jesus.

Now, just to give you the context of Matthew 18, here Jesus teaches his disciples about the radical nature of forgiveness in the Kingdom of Heaven. In particular, Jesus shows them (now that they are in the Kingdom) what their relationships to each othershould look like and what he tells them is, to be honest, counterintuitive. Forgiveness reigns supreme as those who have been brought to live under his gracious rule are invited to reflect that grace in their own lives. This affects the lives of believers and the relationships between them. Forgiveness and reconciliation dominate this relationship as believers are not to let fellow believers live in unforgiveness. I am going to say that again . . . forgiveness and reconciliation are to dominate this relationship. In fact, earlier in this chapter we see Jesus putting the onus on the injured party to actually initiate contact with the brother or sister who sins against him. While the world, and probably many of us, would say that the offender needs to apologize first, Jesus says the exact opposite. In the reign of heaven, it is Jesus who went to seek and to save the lost. Likewise, with his followers, they are to try and restore one who has sinned and offer both personal forgiveness and the forgiveness that Christ Jesus so freely offered them.

By the time we get to our reading for today, Peter, at least in part, apparently caught on that Jesus was suggesting something very new and different for their lives. However, as his question shows, he still didn’t fully grasp the radical nature of forgiveness under Jesus’ reign. *“Peter came up and said to Jesus, ‘Lord how often will my brother sin against me and I forgive him? As many as seven times?’”*

Now, do you see where Peter’s mind is? He knows that forgiveness is hard. He knows that it is a difficult thing and so he is looking for the upper limits on his obligations to forgive. He has heard all that Jesus has said about the predominance of forgiveness in the kingdom and yet he, in essences, asks Jesus, *“OK, Jesus, where do I get to draw the line?”*

To be sure, by the standards of the day, Peter’s offer of seven times is more than generous. The general Jewish rule of thumb was that you were obligated to forgive three times. With the fourth offense your obligations to forgive were done. Here, Peter not only doubles the old rule, he throws in one more for good measure.

Whether or not Peter was simply trying to seek clarification or looking for a congratulatory pat on the back is unclear. Jesus, however, offers clarification any way and in typical Jesus fashion, he flips Peter’s answer on its head. *“I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.”* For the mathematically challenged like me, that’s 490 times! Seven was a nice try, Peter, but, brother, according to Jesus, you weren’t even in the ballpark.

Just to be clear, Jesus is not giving us a quick accounting measure here. He is not literally saying, “*You forgive 490 times and at 491, you send the sinner on his way.”* No, Jesus’ point is that in his kingdom there are no limits on forgiveness for those who repent. The 490 is simply a number that Jesus throws out there to show that Peter’s need to forgive reaches beyond his ability to keep track. And, just to emphasize the point, Jesus tells *The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant.*

Now, I am not going to go into great detail about the parable, but by way of a quick overview, we have this king who wants to settle accounts with his servants. One of those who came owed what was really an astronomical amount of money. Scholars reckon that the sum of 10,000 talents would be equal to about 10 million dollars today. To help put that into perspective, the complete Roman tax for the entire region of Judea was only 600 talents per year. This man owed the king 17 times the tax for an entire country!

Obviously, owing this amount of money meant that this servant could not repay the debt, but, notice what he does. He begs the king to simply give him time, as if time is going to matter. But, all the time in the world would not help him repay the debt. Instead, the king does the remarkable: he forgives the debt and the debtor is pardoned. By forgiving this astronomical debt, the king shows the limitless nature of his forgiveness.

The story goes on, though, and this is where Peter’s question gets addressed. The first servant found a fellow servant who owed him money. And take note that Matthew is particular in that he calls the man a *“fellow servant.”* He is an equal in every way especially, as we see, in his inability to repay his debt. Yet, this fellow servant’s debt, by comparison to the debt of the first servant, seems inconsequential. In today’s wages it would be about $20.00.

Nevertheless the first servant violently attacks him and demands his money and notice closely that this servant asks no more of the unmerciful servant than he had asked of the king. He asked for time to repay. In his case, that seemed a reasonable request because the figure was so small. But, the unmerciful servant had him thrown in jail until he could repay the debt.

You all know the end of the story. The king, furious after hearing what happened, called the servant back. And here, I am going to give you my translation of this text because what the king says is much more emphatic than what you read on the back of the bulletin, “*Evil servant, all that debt I forgave you since you begged me. Should not you, especially you, have had mercy on your fellow servant, just as on you I had mercy? And being furious, his lord delivered him to the torturer until he might repay all owed.”*

The king’s anger is understandable. The man had been forgiven such a huge debt. He owed a debt beyond imagination and yet his debt was forgiven. The king showered him with grace by assuming the debt himself. The burden of the debt on the man imprisoned him and the king in his mercy set him free. If anyone should have understood forgiveness, it should have been him.

But, notice, the harshest words actually come from Jesus in verse 35*, “So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from you heart.”* Listen to those words again, in particular if you are harboring a grudge against someone, *So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from you heart.”* Ouch! Peter who was trying to find the limit to his obligation to forgive would have felt the sting of those words. My bet, most of us feel the sting of those words as well because they are Law words which are meant to sting. They are words meant to wake us up and to say, *“What was I thinking?”* *If God forgives me so much, how can I withhold forgiveness from my brother?”* They are words meant to show us how hard hearted we can become when it comes to forgiving those who have hurt us. They are words to show us just how quickly, like the unmerciful servant, we can forget the grace and forgiveness given to us.

My dear friends in Christ, so many of Jesus’ parables leave us scratching our heads as to what the real meaning is. That is not the case here. Jesus masterfully uses this parable like a mirror. It points out the vast amount we have been forgiven. We are all servants who had a huge debt. And, like the unmerciful servant, it is a debt for which we cannot pay. Our sin has placed us in an impossible situation. Our rebellions, our selfish acts, our pride, our anger, our lusts, our disregard for God’s word and his will all add up to a staggering debt we owe God. Like the servant we deserve to be thrown to the torturers until the debt is paid. But, what should be obvious to us is that once in the hands of the torturers there is no way to pay the debt and so we would be lost forever.

But Jesus also masterfully shows us the compassion and mercy of our king who came to wear a crown of thorns and to make his throne upon a cross. He shows us the hope in our king who saw the debt we owed and said, *“I’ll pay the debt myself.”* And with his life he paid our debt and in his blood there is limitless forgiveness, for you, for me, for your brother and for your sister. No matter how many times, no matter how often, no matter how frequently we sin, we can always turn to Christ in repentance and find his forgiveness. He promises always to forgive and because he does this for us, our response is to also forgive.

So, getting back to Peter’s original question, *“How many times should I forgive my brother?”*  What is the answer?Well, is there a limit to what God has forgiven you? Well, is there? The answer is a resounding *“No.”* If in the merciful reign of heaven, forgiveness is limitless, should we therefore limit the forgiveness we offer those who hurt us? Of course not. For those who would limit their forgiveness, they demonstrate that they do not understand what it means to live in the Kingdom of Heaven. Do you struggle with this? Are there people in your life for whom your heart has grown hard? If this is something with which you struggle, Jesus gives us answer. Think again of the debt he paid for you. Turn once again to the foot of the cross and taste again the forgiveness of Christ. See the full payment for your debt, watch how it melts your heart and you will come to understand how the boundless nature of heaven’s forgiveness can overflow into your life so that you may also forgive those who have sinned against you. Consider how, empowered by the forgiveness granted you by Christ our Lord, you can set them free from what burdens them.

And setting them free is truly what your forgiveness does. There are many words in the bible used for “forgiveness.” They are all descriptive but my favorite is to *“loosen”* them. When you withhold forgiveness, you are binding someone. You are keeping them tied up until they figure out a way to make it up to you so you can unbind them. When you forgive, you loosen them, you untie them and set them free. It is a beautiful image for that is what God has done for each of us. God has given us this tremendous gift of forgiveness that we might truly understand what forgiving is all about. As citizens of his kingdom, this is a gift we freely give away for it has been freely given to us. Think of it this way, your forgiveness is the key that unlocks the door of their self-made prison. Your forgiveness can set them free as our Lord’s forgiveness has set you free.

This, my dear friends in Christ, is the way of the Kingdom of Heaven where forgiveness abounds, with no restrictions, no conditions and no limits, all for the sake of Christ Jesus. To God be the glory. In Jesus’ name. Amen.