

Pentecost 15 Matt 18 “Forgive, or Else?” September 13 2020

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing unto You, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen!

Our Old Testament reading is one of the most poignant stories in the Bible. Joseph was virtually murdered by his brothers. Sending him to Egypt to be such a slave was as good as killing the young man. But Joseph, of course, did not die, God was with him and eventually his brothers did indeed bow down to him, and he did lord it over them, just as he had dreamt. But back in chapter 45 of Genesis, when Joseph reveals himself to his brothers, he did, in fact, forgive them. He told them not to worry or be angry with themselves. God had turned it all out for good so many lives were saved. Joseph would bear no grudge.

Yet here they are, sometime later, after their father Jacob's death, and they have not really ever believed Joseph's words of forgiveness. They come, fearful, begging and groveling to save their lives from the wrath of a man who had long since given it up. Joseph weeps when he hears this from his brothers. All those years of his kindness and generosity to them were now seen to have been received with suspicion and fear. There is little pain greater than having one's forgiveness disbelieved. You want to restore the relationship, you bear no grudge, you truly love the other, but they will not have it. They cannot believe that your forgiveness is big enough for them. They must pay off a debt which you have forgotten about and which you don't even want to collect on.

In terms of forgiveness, this text also suggests that forgiveness is a process; it is not a once and done sort of event. The reality is that we are talking about people here. And people need to be reassured and comforted, to hear the Good News over and over again. It is a constant process of reminding and remembering.

I love that word “remember.” If you take it apart it is really amazing – we are remembered, literally reattached to the body, to become a member of Christ's body, the Church, over again.

Joseph reassures and comforts his brothers with tangible things. He speaks kindly to them. This is not a proclamation but a tearful brother putting his arms around his brothers and assuring them that he loves them, despite what they have done. He knows what they have done and it does not stand between them. God has taken care of that sin. It is done. Every time I remember it, I will always remember that Jesus died for that, and I will rejoice that it is no longer a problem between us.

The Bible portrays God as a person whose love, rejected, is most painful. Just consider the whole story of Hosea in which his unfaithful lover is the occasion of Hosea's great pain. God likens Israel's rejection to a marriage broken with God as the grieving husband confronted with proof of his wife's infidelity. It speaks of God's great grief at **our** rejection of his love. It is a proud sinner, indeed, who thinks that his sins are bigger than the forgiveness of God.

God loves and forgives, seventy times seven times and more, even sinners like us, even ingrates who have heard the Gospel proclaimed from this pulpit, taken the body and blood of Christ inside us, and yet have gone out from this place and led lives of scale balancing and score settling vindictiveness.

The wicked servant was wicked because he did not really believe that his debt had been forgiven. When **we** confess **our** sins and God forgives, he forgives them all, not just the ones we remember or the ones that trouble us, but he forgives them all, 10,000 talents worth of sins every Sunday.

When we then encounter the 100 denarii sins of our neighbors, what will we do? When we are honest with ourselves, I know a few of my neighbor's sins, but I know all of mine. My sins are so many more and deeper than what I can see of my neighbor. I have a 10,000 talent sin-debt to pay, but I can only see a 100 denari sin-debt of my neighbor. Of course, he has the same perspective, able to see his own sins so much deeper than mine.

If we were simply honest about this, would we ever be able to be judgmental? What would our fellowship look like if we operated with this mind-set? Is this what Paul means when he says that he is the chief of sinners?

What is more, this prompts us to ask some other questions. Is not our failure to forgive those folks really a statement about the forgiveness which Christ offers us in absolution and sacrament right here in this place? Do we have a small forgiveness to offer because we believe that we have only received small forgiveness ourselves?

In our Gospel reading, the dishonest servant cannot pay. The king sends him to collections, which was not unusual at the time. His estate would be liquidated and if that were not enough, he and his family would be sold into slavery until it was all paid off. With a debt this large, the reality is that no one will ever pay it off. This is a situation from which he has no escape.

He pleads for some time, and the king has mercy. He does not grant that request, instead he gives **much** more. Rather than grant more time; he forgives the entire debt.

The servant then goes out and encounters a slave who owes him 100 denarii. In today's terms that would be about \$8,000 dollars (a denarius was what a laborer earned in one day.) I usually explain it as the rough equivalent to a decent used car. He grabs the man and demands the money. Why? Probably he does not believe the king. He thinks he needs to start raising cash.

When this fellow slave begs for time, the very same words which the man himself had used with the king, the request is denied. The servant's estate will be liquidated and he and his family will be sold. To make matters worse, he chokes the man.

The fellow servants are distressed and report it to the king. The king angrily summons the servant before him, and reinstates the debt, since the servant never really believed that it had been forgiven. Jesus ends it with this terrifying application. Likewise, **we** are to forgive from the heart.

All of us have been forgiven so much more by God than what we will ever be called upon to forgive in a neighbor. My sins all are against God, only a few of my neighbor's sins are against me. My sins in aggregate are a mountain to their mole hill. It would seem that the first posture of a Christian in this is humility and gratitude at the gift that God has given us.

There is a connection between the forgiveness we have to offer and the forgiveness we have received. If we find that we cannot forgive, perhaps it's because we do not really believe that we are truly forgiven. The mean-spirited person in our midst may be that way because they don't think that God forgives them. They harbor guilt that leaves no room for kindness and goodness. The failure to forgive is not a failure of doing, but is a failure of receiving forgiveness.

The forgiveness we offer to one another and to the world at large is really empowered by God and is in fact a reflection of what God has done to us. When forgiven of the debt, the man is freed to forgive his fellow servant. He is empowered. It is a model of what the king does for the man.

Jesus' words of application at the end of the parable make this universally applicable. This is not a story about someone who faced any different situation than we do. This is a story about us. The last verse in which Jesus makes this application makes forgiveness a non-optional behavior for Christians.

Too many of us are masters at coping with sins but rarely forgiving them. We deal with the nasty and sinful folks around us, but do we really confront sin for what it is with the sweet goal of applying Jesus' blood and forgiveness to it? Christ's blood has made us all forgivers of the sort that Joseph was in the OT reading. Christ's forgiving love authentically and honestly applied could make our fellowship into the beautiful and attractive event which this world needs.

Solomon summed up his desire for himself and for his people when he prayed to God, "Listen to the plea of your servant and of your people Israel, when they pray toward this place. And listen in heaven your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive (1 Kings 8:30)."

Forgiveness is not comparing ourselves to worse examples of humanity.
Forgiveness is not making excuses for why we have failed and screwed up.
Forgiveness is not a second chance. Forgiveness has no limits.

If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared...for with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with him is plentiful redemption (Psalm 130:3-7).

Jesus did not say to forgive your neighbor three times, as in confront him face to face, then with a brother, then with the church, and then write him off. He said, then treat him like a heathen! What do we do with heathens? We preach them the Gospel. What is the Gospel? It is the good news of forgiveness through Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection for us, apart from any works.

Did Jesus say forgive 7 times? No, he rebuked Peter saying, forgive them seventy times seven times. His love is unlimited and without any merit on our part.

And what is the source of such forgiveness? Absolution, Baptism, Communion, preaching, and the community of God's people. These are the places where God speaks that saving Word of forgiveness in Christ Jesus for us.

The gift of forgiveness proceeds solely out of God's love and proceeds any action on the part of the receiver. The father runs to and hugs his prodigal son before any words of confession come out of his son's mouth. Jesus Christ dies on the cross, explicitly asking that His Father forgive them, solely for the joy that was set before Him, despising the shame for the world of people who were and are completely and helplessly dead in their sins. He waited for nothing, not repentance, not reform, nothing. Jesus Christ's resurrection did and does everything that needs to be done.

In heaven, there are no good guys, no upright, no successful types, only forgiven sinners. In hell also, there are only forgiven sinners. The only difference is, in heaven the forgiveness has been received in faith and in hell it has been rejected. This forgiveness is for you. Receive it, live in it, solely by the gift of faith in Christ.

May the love of God and the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit abide in you to life everlasting. Amen!