

Sunday: Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Date: September 13, 2020

Text: Matthew 18:21-35

Title: A Lifetime of Forgiving

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Please pray with me.

I am pretty sure, none of us like being taken advantage of. When my Ford truck died a few weeks ago, I knew I was going to have to replace it. I am not a fan of car shopping, to put it mildly. I have bought vehicles in the past and find the haggling over price to be quite distasteful and incredibly annoying. As I thought about the whole prospect of getting a vehicle, my stomach began to churn, and my stress levels went up. I looked on-line for trucks that would adequately replace my 16-year-old Ford. Each used vehicle I looked at made me wonder if I was just buying problems that someone else wanted to be rid of. Looking at new cars made me shudder at the cost and the idea of arguing over price, options, and the hard-sell on extended warranties. All of this seemed to relate back to a feeling that I might be getting taken advantage of.

This feeling is not limited to buying cars. “Buyers remorse” is identified relating to many, many purchases. The list includes cars, homes, televisions, appliances, and even groceries. How many times have you bought something only to reflect on the purchase afterwards and wonder why? Everyday I see advertisements for applications for my phone or computer that will search out the lowest prices for products I intend to buy. Store after store advertise that they have the guaranteed lowest prices, also saying if I find a lower price, they will match it. This doesn’t really give you much confidence does it? I still have to seek out lower prices.

This feeling of being taken advantage of does not only occur in buying stuff. Peter’s inquiry of Jesus in our Gospel reading today, implicates much the same feeling. “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? When one brother sins against another, isn’t that a form of the aggressor brother taking advantage of the victim? Often, we feel victimized when sinned against. Anymore, the slightest insult, a sin against us, is turned into a major assault upon us, for which punishment or restitution is required.

In a world governed by the philosophy of an eye for an eye, forgiving once would be pretty generous, wouldn't it? Peter seems to go the extra mile by volunteering to forgive 7 times. Let's face it, if someone does something to you seven times, they are treating you unfairly. They are putting themselves above you and taking advantage of you. While sometimes we may resign ourselves to being used and/or abused by others, it still creates internal problems. We harbor resentment, anger, and often, hatred toward the offending person.

When Jesus tells Peter and the other disciples that they must forgive 70 times 7, they must have responded in wide-eyed wonder and shock? 490 times is a huge number of times that a person must be subjected to the whims of another without demanding justice. The number Jesus announces is not meant to be a hard and fast limit on the number of times one forgives another. Jesus does not, truly, identify the limit of our forgiveness. He does not identify for us the number of lines on the forgiveness ledger for each brother and sister in our lives.

To illustrate his point, Jesus tells the parable of the unforgiving servant. In this kingdom of heaven parable, Jesus speaks of life in the kingdom he brought with him to earth. Jesus inaugurated the kingdom of heaven in his life and ministry. The kingdom of heaven is what we live in now, with the joyful anticipation of the not yet complete fulfillment of all that is promised.

As a king begins to settle his accounts with his servants, one servant is called to come before him and give an account. This servant owed the king 10,000 talents. This was no meager sum. Scholars have indicated that a talent was about 6,000 denarii. With a denarius being a day's wages, the amount this servant owed the king was 60,000,000 days wages. In today's numbers the debt would be roughly equivalent to \$5,000,000,000. Not a simple sum to pay off. When the man says he does not have the funds available to pay that off, the king does what he is rightfully able to do. He orders the man and his family imprisoned in order to pay the debt.

The servant, crushed by the sentence of imprisonment, asks for time to repay the debt. Interesting to note, that he does not ask for mercy, or forgiveness of the debt, but only asks for time to work off the obligation.

The king who has a contractual relationship with the servant, does not invoke the letter of the covenant. Instead, he forgives the servant the entire debt. In his act of forgiving him the debt, the king gave the servant a new life. In his mercy, the king sets the servant free with the expectation that he will mirror the mercy he

received to those he comes in contact with. The king expects the man to share his good fortune with all he meets.

The servant leaves the presence of the king with his whole life ahead of him. He is free from the debt that smothered him. He no longer has a worry about owing anyone anything. He had received a gift far greater than he could have imagined.

When he encounters a fellow servant, who owes him 100 denarii, his demeanor changes. He becomes a tyrant, demanding immediate payment of all that is owed to him. His fellow servant asks for his creditor to be patient with him and he will repay all that he owes. But the first servant having forgotten the mercy shown to him, grabs the second servant by the throat and begin choking him. When the man could not repay the 100 denarii, he has him thrown into prison until he would repay what was owed.

When the king heard of what had happened, he was angry. The mercy he had shown in forgiving the entire debt of the servant was expected to be carried forward and shared with the servant's debtors. In response, the king rescinded his unilateral gift of forgiveness and reinstated the obligation to repay everything that was owed.

In the context of the parable of the unforgiving servant, Jesus is reinforcing some of his earliest teachings. When Jesus taught the disciples how to pray, he said,

Pray then like this:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed by your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, **and forgive us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors . . .** (Matthew 6:9-13).

In the explanation to the Fifth Petition of The Lord's Prayer, in the Small Catechism, Luther writes:

What does this mean? We pray in this petition that our Father in heaven would not look at our sins or deny our prayer because of them. We are neither worthy of the things for which we pray, nor do we deserve them, but we ask that He would give them all to us by grace, for we daily sin much and surely deserve nothing but

punishment. So we too will sincerely forgive and gladly do good to those who sin against us.

Jesus parable reflects the overwhelming forgiveness given us by the king. Our Father wipes the slate clean, erases our debt not because we merit it, but because of his mercy. Our debts, or sins, are so great, we could never satisfy the demands the law imposes for our restoration. We are broken and sinful creatures. As Luther puts it, “We daily sin much and surely deserve nothing but punishment.”

In our first reading this morning, Joseph allays the fears of his brothers after the death of their father. Though he had reason to harbor ill-will toward them, he reflected on the gifts God had given to him, even when evil was perpetrated against him. He reflected God’s mercy on his brothers just as Our Father expects all forgiven sinners to do.

God’s love is so great that he does not invoke his rights to repayment for our trespasses. Instead he cancels our debts on account of the sacrifice of Jesus his dear Son. Jesus’ death paid the price for our sins and God counts that as our repayment. Jesus did not have to pay our debt but in God’s infinite mercy, he redeemed us. This without regard to the fact we did not deserve it. Yet our debt was erased. As a result of Jesus’ bearing our sins and paying the penalties for our deficiencies, God wipes out the debt for all who believe in Christ and the work he has done for us. Through Christ the unimaginable debt we owe is satisfied and we are freed from its burdens.

Given a new life, a life free from debts, we are called to love our neighbors and freely forgive them their debts. In his activity, we are not being taken advantage of but are instead sharing the gifts given to us. Just like Joseph, our response to the glorious blessings we receive is to forgive all who do evil against us. We forgive all who sin against us.

In our Baptism, the full forgiveness of our debt is given us. The atoning sacrifice of Christ, the objective justification—payment for the sins of the whole world—are brought into our heart. We receive the subjective justification for sins. The application of Christ’s atoning sacrifice for each of us personally. We are forgiven and brought into the kingdom of heaven.

As we begin our worship each week, we come before the throne of the king as debtors who cannot repay the obligations we have incurred. In the King’s love for us, our God gives us comfort and peace in the absolution. Following the

confession of our sins, God, who is faithful and just forgives us all our sins as your pastor announces to you forgiveness of all your sins in the name and by the command of Jesus.

God further gives us his comfort in the celebration of the Lord's Supper. This foretaste of the feast to come when Christ returns, bestows on us in the here and now the forgiveness of sins and assures us of our salvation.

These precious gifts are too great to keep just to ourselves. As people freed from the bonds of indebtedness, we are called to share this freedom with our brothers who sin against us. These brothers are the greatest in the kingdom of heaven as they are the ones at risk of being lost for all eternity. They too have debts owed to the King. As we forgive them, they experience a small taste of the full feast God has for them as he desires to bless them with the forgiveness, he gives freely to all who believe in Christ.

We need not worry about being taken advantage of by our brothers who sin against us. Why? Because we have been given relief from an unfathomable debt, blessed by not being held accountable for taking advantage of God and sinning against Him.

Thanks be to God that our debts have been canceled and may he help us to forgive our brothers sharing the gift of forgiveness we so extravagantly have received.

Amen