

FORGIVEN AND FORGIVING!

Matthew 18:21–35

Pentecost 13

Rev. Steven D. Spencer – Pastor Messiah Lutheran Church

Grace, peace and mercy from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, AMEN!

“Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?” Now there’s a great question. There’s got to be a limit, right? A certain line in the sand, the last straw on the camel’s back, the absolute point beyond which you shall not go, and thus be justified in not forgiving? Okay, Jesus did teach the disciples to pray as though forgiveness depended entirely on you - “forgive us our trespasses in the same way as we forgive our trespassers.” Forgive us just like we forgive others, Lord. But there has to be a limit, right? The same sin, over and over, again. There must be a limit. The rabbis of Jesus’ day said three times. That was spiritual enough. Three times you forgive your brother for the same sin, but on the fourth time all bets are off.

Peter goes to the next higher divine number. Seven. Seven times, Lord. That’s God’s Holy Sabbath number that should do it, right? And it seems generous, once for each day of the week. Seven times you are sinned against, seven times forgive. It sounds good, generous, perfect, divine. It outdoes the rabbis by more than double. Jesus has to be pleased with how forgiving Peter is willing to be. Seven times?

No, says Jesus. Not seven times. Kick it up another notch. Several notches to be certain-seventy times seven. That’s seven driven to the point of utter completeness seven times over. 490 if you are counting, but who wants to count that much? You’ll lose count well before that, and that’s the point.

Forgiveness keeps no count. Bookkeeping is the way of the Law, and oh how we love to count the sins against us! We keep our sharp-penciled spreadsheets of all the dastardly deeds done against us. He cheated me, she slandered me, he made a bad face at me. Grudges are nursed, cultivated, and kept close at hand on a leash like a pet. “I’m never speaking to him again for what he did.” “What did he do?” “Well gee, I don’t remember, but I’m never speaking to him again. That much I do remember.”

Forgiveness keeps no records of wrongs. Freely we are forgiven; freely we forgive. Jesus told a parable, one of those troubling parable stories designed to shake up the status quo. A king forgave his servant an enormous debt. It was an absurd amount of money, more than could be repaid in a lifetime. The man deserved a debtor’s prison, but instead, by sheer grace, the king let him off scot-free.

What does this guy do with his freedom? He goes out and tracks down his fellow servant and grabs him by the throat and demands the meager amount he owes him. He’s just been excused an unpayable debt, but here, with his brother, his fellow servant, he demands every penny of a tiny, almost insignificant debt. And he does it all in full view of the other servants, who aren’t too happy with all this and report it to the king. And when the king hears about it, all bets (and debt forgiveness) are off, and he throws the wicked servant into prison until his debt is paid off. **“And that’s how your heavenly Father will deal with you if you don’t forgive your brother from the heart.”** “This is the Gospel of the Lord.”

God hates unforgiveness. He really hates it. He's like the king in the parable when he discovers that His grace is being used to extract the last dime out of a fellow servant. God hates that. Jesus made it a point to expand on that troubling fifth petition of the Lord's Prayer. ***"For if you forgive men their trespasses, your Father in heaven will forgive you; but if you do not forgive, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."***

Don't turn this into a transaction. It won't work. Remember the parable. Who forgives first? The king! Who is forgiven first? The servant who owes an unpayable debt. We won't get it right until we get this right. God forgives us first, and we are the ones who owe Him everything. What others do to us, that's all pocket change, compared to what we owe God. That's one of the problems of unforgiveness - we deny how much God has forgiven us.

The other problem is that unforgiveness sets us against God. He's in the forgiveness business. He sent His Son to die and rise in order to forgive the sin of the world. And when we turn around and hold the world hostage to our unforgiveness, we are therefore denying God's forgiveness. Worse, we are taking the place of God.

Think about Joseph, sold into slavery by his brothers. They wanted to kill him at first, but Reuben, the oldest, dissuaded them. Instead they tossed him into a dry well and sold him to the first bunch of slave traders that came along. He was hauled off to Egypt and there he wound up a servant in the house of Potiphar, one of the Pharaoh's officials. After a close brush with Potiphar's wife, he ended up in an Egyptian prison. But the Lord was with Joseph, and ended up in charge of all the prisoners. And thanks to God's gift of interpreting Pharaoh's dreams, Joseph was released from prison and put in charge of the whole grain supply of Egypt, so that when a famine hit Israel Joseph "just so happened" to be at the right place and time to help his father, brothers and their families.

He played them along for a while because they didn't recognize him. And finally there is that tearful reunion where Joseph reveals who he is to his brothers. Then father Jacob dies, and the brothers are afraid, figuring that Joseph is going to finally take revenge on them. They send word to Joseph begging for forgiveness for all they evil they had done to him. And when Joseph heard this, he wept openly, and his brothers came and knelt down before him and said, "We are your servants," trying to bargain, trying to cut a deal with their brother Joseph.

But Joseph would have none of it. ***"Am I in the place of God?"*** he asks. How can I not forgive in the face of the God who forgives? And then comes that memorable line that is engraved in the Scriptures for our learning, and oh how we need to hear this over and over again. ***"You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today."*** You meant it for evil; God used it for good.

Dare we believe this? Dare we believe that the evil the world throws at us, the evil our friends and family throw at us, the evil our very brothers do against us, that God will take it up in His own hands and redirect it for good? Dare we believe such a thing?

Look to the cross of Jesus. Men meant it for evil. They wanted to kill the Son of God, get rid of Him for good, silence Him and destroy Him. They lied, they conspired and abused justice to get Him nailed to an executioners cross. It was evil compounded upon evil. And God used it for good - for your salvation, for mine and for the whole world.

Helmut Thielicke was a German Lutheran pastor who served in Stuttgart during WW II. His congregation met amidst the sound of air raid sirens and bombs. They went from a church to a parish hall auditorium as their church was bombed to ruins. He writes:

"We therefore must not simply say: "God" sends death, "God" sends cancer, and "God" sends multiple sclerosis. The existence of these powers is radically contrary to God's plan of salvation. He allows it, and He undoubtedly is thinking His own higher thoughts when He does so. And even we men, small and sinful as we are sometimes able to grasp in our thought why God must perform these "alien" works, why He goes along with the world's judgment upon itself, and why He delivers us to it.

But then there is this other fact which is just as true - the totally new fact, which no man could ever discover by himself. Everything God permits the dark powers to do must first pass in review before Him. Everything is examined and censored by His fatherly eye to see whether it will really work "for good with those who love Him." Everything must first pass by him, every bomb that may strike me, every shell-splinter that may take my dearest away from me, every intrigue or chicanery that men may inflict upon me.

And since it must first pass by Him before it can strike me, there happens what always happens when a thing or a person is looked upon by the eye of God: a great transformation takes place: Sufferings become trials which are meant to be endured in order that I may be purged and refined like the precious metal of gold. The great time of terror, in which the furies of man's brutality, blindness, and hubris are unleashed, become times of visitation. Death, the "last enemy" becomes the "desire to depart and be with Christ" (Phil 1:23). The dreadful valleys of the shadow which I must traverse become the places where I learn to know God the Good Shepherd and rely upon His rod and His staff. The anxieties that torment me as I face the insecurity of my existence and the dark curtain of the future become the raw material which God builds my trust and my faith. "Crosses lift their arms above every pain."

It is as if God intercepts these originally evil and disastrous missiles of fate, catches them in his fatherly arms, and sends them in the direction He wants them to go for the benefit of His children.

So everything is transformed for those who are His children, for those who have seen the Father in Jesus' life and death, and never again will let Him go. Then it comes from His hands; in any case it must go through His hands. And we all know what a tremendous comfort it is to be able to accept something from the hand of our God." (Our Heavenly Father, pp. 27-28)

You meant it for evil; God has used it for good. That's faith talk. God intercepts the missiles intended for our destruction and redirects them for our good. That's faith in Jesus talk. It all goes through the cross of Jesus, through His crucified Body, through His shed Blood. God has made peace with the world, and with you, His baptized children. How can you not forgive? How can you not let go and let it be? How can you not die to all the evil done against you, knowing and believing that God in Christ Jesus has worked it for your good? Forgive the brother, the sister, the neighbor, the enemy. Not just three times or seven times but seventy times seven, and you will know the freedom that comes with being a child of God. You will know the freedom of being forgiven.

For you are forgiven in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit for Jesus sake and for yours, in Jesus name, Amen and amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, AMEN!