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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Proper 19, Series A (Pentecost 15)
Saturday, September 12th, 2020
Sunday, September 13th, 2020

Sermon: Once More from the Heart!¹

Text: Matthew 18:21-35

Focus: God forgives our sin debt freely and fully without any merit or worthiness in me.

Function: That they would sincerely forgive others for their sins against them.

Structure: Story-Framed

Locus: “We are neither worthy of the things for which we pray, nor have we deserved 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” (SC, Fifth Petition).

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!

Amen. Today’s Gospel reading is one of those teachings of Jesus that I wish we didn’t have to hear today. After sharing a powerful parable about the terrible consequences of ungrace, Jesus warns, “So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you if you do not forgive your brother from your heart” (Matt. 18:35, ESV).² It’s that last phrase that gets me: “*from the heart.*” Not just lip service. Not just a letter or text. No, we must forgive them *from the heart*—from the very core of who we are as people.

Oh, we could spend all day talking about the *ideal* of forgiveness. We could treat it like a question of casuistry, as Peter does at the start of our Gospel reading. But when the rubber hits the road and we’re talking about actual relationships with people who have really wronged me, it’s a lot harder to forgive. As C.S. Lewis writes in *Mere Christianity*, “Every one [*sic.*] says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive...”

¹ This is a revision of a sermon originally preached at Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado, on September 17th, 2017.

² All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

We'd rather say things like "I'll forgive, but not forget," so we can leave a little bit of hedge room to hold something against them in the ledgers of our hearts. We love to keep score! But no, Jesus says, I must forgive them from the heart or there will be, quite literally, hell to pay. Jesus says so in the Sermon on the Mount: Either we forgive others who sin against us, or we ourselves will not be forgiven (Matt. 6:14-15). Jeff Gibbs points out that, Jesus leaves us absolutely "no wiggle room" on this point.³ There are no ifs, ands, or buts about it.

But forgiveness is hard work, which is why Peter came to Jesus with his question. "Lord," he asked, "how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" (Matt. 18:21). We may chortle at Peter's attempt to limit his responsibility to forgive other people. But it was a valid question. Jesus had just given to his apostles the keys of the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 16:19; 18:18). This "office of the keys" is the authority given by God to the Church to forgive penitent sinners and withhold forgiveness from the impenitent. Jesus gave his apostles a very important responsibility (which you can learn more about by listening to my sermon from Thursday morning, which I posted online).

And Peter, as a keyholder in the office, needed to know how to rightly discharge his office. How *many* times must he forgive before he binds someone in the chains of their sins? The Jewish rabbis of Jesus' day said that you only had to forgive a person three times. The fourth time they wronged you, you could write them off as a dirty, rotten scoundrel and have nothing more to do with them. So three times was the maximum number of forgiveness.

So Peter is being rather generous by his suggestion of seven times. He takes the rabbis' number, multiplies it by 2, and adds 1.

³ Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Matthew 11:2-20:34* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2010), 937.

But Jesus said, “Not... seven times,” Jesus said, “but seventy times seven” (Matt. 18:22). Ah, that explains it... So need only to forgive other people 490 times, but the 491st time that they sin against us, we can hold a grudge. Is that what Jesus means? No, of course not. Jesus isn't going to engage in a kind of calculus for computing how much forgiveness is required. His point is simple enough: never stop forgiving. Seven is the Hebrew number of perfection. Therefore, 490, as a multiple of 7, represents perfect, unconditional grace.

To emphasize this, Jesus tells the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, one of the most terrifying stories ever told in Scripture. Jesus says that the reign of heaven is like a king settling accounts with his servants. He calls them in one by one to pay off their debts. One particular servant owes a sum of ten thousand talents. It's hard for us to grasp the amount of money we're dealing with here. One Bible commentator, William Barclay, points out that the annual tax revenue of a wealthy Roman province like Galilee only came to about three *hundred* talents—a mere fraction of what this man owed. The ESV Study Bible points out that a talent was worth about 20 years' worth of wages for a common laborer. And this guy owed ten *thousand* talents, or about 200,000 years of wages. The number is so astronomical we can hardly fathom it. Based on Colorado's minimum wage (\$11.10 per hour), that amounts to almost \$4.5 *billion* dollars! This is not normal credit card debt. This is debt on the scale of a large municipality or department of the Federal government.

Unfortunately for our friend, he has no way to repay it, so the king orders that he and his family be sold into slavery in order to pay off the debt. Fearing the breakup of his family, the servant falls on the king's mercy and begs him, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything” (Matt. 18:26). It's a desperate plea and an impossible promise. How can he ever pay back that much money?

Yet the king does better than give him more time. Instead of being patient, he outright *forgives* him instead and lets the poor man go free. But keep in mind that debt never just disappears. If somebody's debt is cancelled, it has to get paid by somebody else down the line (something that our Senators and Congressmen seem not to know). No, by wiping clean the slate of the servant, the king assumes the debt upon *himself*. He assumes all the risk for being out all that money. Clearly, this king is somebody quite special. You might even say that he acts like a kinsman-redeemer to the man.

Suddenly, the servant is a free man with not a cent of debt to his name. But tragically, he is not a changed man, a new man. He should have rejoiced at the king's grace, but instead he starts calling due the loans he has extended to others. He goes out and finds his fellow servant, a man who owes him a mere 100 denarii (about three months' wages) and shakes him down. "Pay what you owe!" he demands, choking the poor fellow before giving him a chance to make good on the debt.

So in a familiar move, the other servant falls down on his knees and begs the first man, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you" (v. 29). His plea is eerily familiar—an echo of what the first servant begged of the king. It's *déjà vu*! But his heart is too hardened to recognize this fact. He refuses to forgive his debt or give him more time and instead throws the other guy into debtor's prison (v. 30).

When the other servants see this, they are "distressed," Jesus tells us (v. 30). No doubt! That is an understatement. They probably also owe him money and worry about what he will do to them. So they go and make report to the king, who is absolutely outraged at what he hears.

“You wicked servant!” he shouts. “I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?” (Matt. 18:32-33).

Remember the difference in the amount of debt we’re taking about. The wicked servant owed ten thousand talents, or about four *billion* dollars. The other servant only owed 100 denarii, or about seven *thousand* dollars. Seven thousand dollars is a lot of money, that’s true, but it’s nothing compared to four billion.

So what does the king do with the wicked, unforgiving servant? Does he sell his family into slavery? Does he put him in debtor’s prison? No, he does worse than any of that. He hands him over to the jailers to be tortured in a torture chamber. (I know that the ESV reads simply “jailers,” but the Greek word *basanistais* literally means torturers). Will this guy be able to pay off his debt? I’d say there’s no way in hell—literally. He could never make enough license plates in prison to pay off what he owes.

Then Jesus adds this sobering corollary to his tale: “So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart” (Matt. 18:35). There it is again: *from your heart!*

This parable proves that if we have a bitter, angry, hardened heart and refuse to forgive other people, then we’d better watch out. Because there will be hell to pay. Eternal damnation is the punishment God promises to us if we fail to forgive others. As Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount: “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you *do not* forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive *your* trespasses” (Matt. 6:14-15).

In the Biblical version of the Lord's Prayer (not the liturgical version we say in church), we hear echoes of the unforgiving servant's debt because there our sins are described in economic terms: "forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matt. 6:12). In the Old Testament, God commanded that once every 50 years (the year of Jubilee), everyone's debts would be forgiven, all foreclosed property restored, and all slaves set free. Every 50 years, all debts would be cancelled and reset to zero (Leviticus 25). But for us Christians, *each and every day* is Jubilee! Every *day* is a day to stop keeping score and set things back to zero, to forgive those who "owe us," so to speak.

So think about the people in your life who have hurt you, the people against whom you nurse a grudge, the people of whom you say, "I wouldn't forgive them in a hundred years!" How many times does Jesus ask you to forgive them? Once? Twice? Three times, as the rabbis suggest? 7 times, as Peter offers? 77 times? 490 times? Or as many as it takes?

Do you really need me to answer that question for you? When we look at the sin debt of other people—the huge pile of grievances we have against them—it can certainly look like a giant heap. But it's nothing compared to the burden of guilt we owe to Jesus. As Luther writes in the Small Catechism, "We daily sin much and surely deserve nothing but punishment" (SC, 5th Petition of the Lord's Prayer). If our salvation were dependent upon working off our sin debt and making amends, our ledger would always remain in the red. You could never do enough right to outweigh the wrongs in order to make yourself right with God.

So God in his mercy did something about it. He sent Jesus to die on the cross and pay off your debt with his holy, precious blood—the costliest treasure the world has ever seen. He wiped your slate clean. He erased your sin-debt and removed your guilt. Did you deserve it? No, of course not! But Jesus is a gracious God and forgiving Lord. "He does not deal with us

according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities” (Ps. 103:10). “As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us” (Ps. 103:12). God’s amazing grace is astronomical and unfathomable.

And in response to his abundant grace, we show grace to others. The Bible says, “Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Eph. 4:31-32). As forgiven sinners, we are called to forgive others *in the exact same way* that God in Christ forgave us. “Forgive us *our* debts, as we also have forgiven our *debtors*” (Matt. 6:12).

Christ’s mercy fills our hearts and overflows into the lives of the people around us, no matter how great their offenses may be. God’s children forgive as God forgives—“from the heart” (Matt. 18:35). Forgiveness isn’t easy, but God changes hearts. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.