

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost - Year A

26th Sunday of Quarantine (27th Overall)

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Genesis 50:15-21

Psalms 103:[1-7] 8-13

Romans 14:1-12

Matthew 18:21-35

09/13/2020

### **Gospel**

The Holy Gospel according to St. Matthew:

21Peter came and said to [Jesus], "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" 22Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. 23"For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. 24When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; 25and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. 26So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' 27And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. 28But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' 29Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me,

and I will pay you.’ 30But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. 31When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. 32Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ 34And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. 35So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

The Gospel of our Lord

### **Prayer**

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

Amen.

### **Forgiveness**

Good morning! Make no mistake. The fourteen verses in today’s Gospel text are among the most powerful in all of scripture. These words are powerful, and very dangerous. They have been used by abusers to convince victims to stay and endure continued violence. They have been used by people with no intention of changing to talk others into staying. Forgiveness can be easily misconstrued. And forgiveness can prove to be a powerful thing. We all have stories of forgiveness, here is one of mine.

I was in the eighth grade, and it was the fall. I heard the next day about Chris getting injured during the football practice the day before when

someone accidentally stepped on his back. At some point in the next few days we got more news, the doctors found something when examining his spine. Then we were told it was cancer, leukemia. We all felt horrible for Chris, but my feelings were ones of guilt, not just sadness. You see, I had been friends with Chris, but the previous year on a field trip we had made fun of him, and ever since then we had grown distant. So, as Chris got more and more sick, I yearned for forgiveness from him. He couldn't attend school, so we often send cards and other things to him so that he would know we were still thinking of him. I remember writing and asking him to forgive me in every one that I wrote. But most of us didn't get replies, contact was limited to a few friends and family. The next time I saw Chris was at a football game. But this wasn't the Chris I had known. He had always been a happy guy, someone who had at least 6 inches of height on most of us, he was lineman on the football team. Chris was in a van at one end of the football field listening to the game. He couldn't really walk, hence the van. He couldn't see either, which is why he was listening to the game, not watching. He couldn't have weighed more than 100 pounds. His hair was gone, and he was pale. I asked only one thing: "Do you forgive me?" "Yes, Tim, I forgive you" Chris said. Because that's the type of good guy he was. He died before the year was out.

Like I said, forgiveness is a powerful thing. Which is why Jesus takes Peter's question and devotes serious time to his answer. Peter begins with asking if seven times is enough to forgive, which is already a generous number. But in response, Jesus supersedes any attempt to put forgiveness at a limit. Jesus' response in verse 22 puts the number much higher.

Seventy-seven is probably a reference to Genesis 4:24 “...where Lamech proudly boasts to his wives that he will avenge himself seventy-sevenfold on anyone who dares attack him.”<sup>1</sup> In stating this, Jesus reverses the violence of the Genesis statement, multiplying forgiveness infinitely.

Which brings us to the parable itself. I’m not sure why, but a number of biblical stories stick out in my mind from an early age, and this is certainly one of them. I think it was the reversal of behavior on the part of the servant that I found so surprising; “You just got a big break man! How can you treat another person that way?,” I wondered. As I’ve gotten a little older, the story has stuck with me, and I’ve picked up a few more details. The parable assumes a Gentile king and setting. For one, Jews didn’t have a king, and two, they were forbidden from selling wives to settle a husband’s debts. The language of king is correct, but the term slave is misleading. Servant doesn’t fit either, because we’re dealing with someone like a governor or administrator in charge of handling the king’s affairs over a designated geographical area of the kingdom.

The king summons the slave to reconcile the debt. But man, what a debt this is! The reality is that this is less of a debt, and more of a case of embezzlement. The servant didn’t borrow the money, but has taken a large cut off of taxes. The amount is ten thousand talents, which if you’re like me, means absolutely nothing. But to put this sum into perspective, the entire tax revenue from the area that Herod the Great controlled for the Roman Empire only produced 900 talents annually!<sup>2</sup> That’s less than 10% of what

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<sup>1</sup> Hare, Douglas R. *Matthew*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. p. 216.

<sup>2</sup> Keck, Leander E. *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*. Volume 7. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2015. p. 282.

this servant owes the king! The servant has literally stolen a kingdom's worth of money. The point of the story is to illustrate that this is an impossibly large sum, but that doesn't stop us from trying to put it into context. Douglas R.A. Hare points out that this amount is "*equivalent to a day's wages for 100,000,000 laborers! Restitution is impossible.*"<sup>3</sup> A single talent was worth roughly 45 pounds of silver. (Yes, I said 45 pounds!) And one talent was the equivalent of 15 years of work for the average person.<sup>4</sup> The guy is never paying this back. The king decides to cut his losses by torturing the servant and then selling him, his property and belongings, his children, and his wife. Hare points out that when a woman was sold into slavery, it often resulted in sexual abuse.<sup>5</sup> It's not looking good to the servant. But after begging, the king changes his mind. As the servant leaves, having avoided certain death, he comes across another person who owes him 100 denarii. While this is certainly a lot of money, roughly what the average person would make in 100 days, it's most certainly payable. But instead of compassion and mercy, the servant has the other beaten and taken to prison. When the deed is witnessed by others, it's reported to the king who angrily recalls the servant and after a rebuke, hands the man over "*to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt.*" Which, as we discussed, was impossible to repay, so the torture would continue until the servant died.

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<sup>3</sup> Hare, Douglas R. *Matthew*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. p. 217

<sup>4</sup> Keck, Leander E. *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*. Volume 7. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2015. p. 282.

<sup>5</sup> Hare, Douglas R. *Matthew*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. p. 217.

The story is a poignant reminder of what we owe God. Everything. The debt of our sin is impossible to repay, and yet we are forgiven! The amount that the first servant owed was so large so that it might illustrate the fact that to God, we can't ever make restitution. And yet we continue to act like the servant, holding grudges and demanding retribution for the slights and decisions of others. Hare writes that "*Unlimited forgiveness is not to be confused with sentimental toleration of hurtful behavior.*"<sup>6</sup> We covered that last week, some behavior shouldn't be tolerated. And let me be clear, I'm not advocating that we forget what happened. I'm not sure how that whole "forgiveness equals forgetting" got started, but it doesn't fit. The first part of confession involves us acknowledging our mistakes, not dismissing them. But what is clear is that we continue to work towards forgiveness forever, never stopping. Because our God never stopped either! Even as we ridiculed Jesus, as we abandoned him during his arrest, when we mocked him, beat him, and watched as he was crucified, during all of this God forgave us. And upon the cross Jesus reminded us of the infiniteness of God's love, uttering "*Father forgive them.*"<sup>7</sup> Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 218.

<sup>7</sup> Luke 24:34 NRSV