Fifteenth Sunday of Pentecost Ascension Lutheran Church

September 17, 2017 Pastor Angela T. Khabeb

Forgive aka The *Other* “F” Word

(Matthew 18:21-35)

When I have preached about this passage in the past, I’ve basically encouraged people to consider how often we are in need of forgiveness ourselves, how much God forgives us, and that we should go and do likewise. But when I encountered the text this time, I was distracted by many questions. For example, Peter asks, “if a *member of my church* sins against me…” Peter didn’t ask about a stranger or an enemy, but he was concerned about how to deal with relationships within his community.

Furthermore, what is forgiveness? Does it mean we become best friends and hang out with each other? What about trust? Is it wise for me to trust this person again if they had deliberately betrayed me? Isn’t it enough for me to simply not hate the sight of them, to not want to kill them? Isn’t that enough? What if I can actually be cordial to them? What if I no longer have the need to ‘get even’? What does complete forgiveness look like?

Now, before I go any further, I want to pause and stress that if someone is in an abusive situation, God is not requiring you to stay there and risk your life and the lives of your children. There are times when we must forgive from a distance. We can continue to love the person but if the relationship is physically, verbally, emotionally, or financially abusive, the most loving and faith-filled response for you is to be safe and healthy so you can continue to live for God. No one, especially your abuser, can use ‘forgiveness’ as a threat or a weapon. (i.e. You have to stay in relationship with me because the Bible says you have to forgive me.) Let’s be clear. When we try to enforce forgiveness like it is a law and not an act of God’s love and grace, all of humanity is in jeopardy.

In the parable that Jesus offers in response to Peter’s question about forgiveness, we are introduced to a king and two slaves. The king forgives a huge debt for the first slave who owed 10,000 talents. Sisters and brothers, this is an astronomical amount. One talent was approximately 130 pounds of silver and would take a laborer about fifteen years to earn. Which means that it would take this man 150,000 years to work off that debt! At this point in the parable, I was distracted by another question. How in the world did he accumulate that much debt? Bad investments? Student loans? Stock market crash? Payday loans? Gambling debts? I’m not sure why, but the amount of this man’s debt bothered me. But I’m sure it’s not important how he acquired the debt but rather that he was forgiven a debt that he could never ever repay.

The parable continues as the forgiven man returns to collect a debt owed to him by another slave. The debt was 100 denarii. A denarius was equivalent to about a day’s wage. This means that the indebted slave owed the forgiven slave about three months wages—certainly not a small debt but nothing near the mountain of debt that the king cancelled for the forgiven slave. What does the forgiven slave do? The forgiven slave, grabs his friend by the throat and shows him no mercy. He throws the man into debtors’ prison until he can repay what he owes.

The forgiven slave’s actions seem treacherous and surprising. After all, if a person has been treated with dignity and respect, he will treat others likewise. Or if someone has been showered with grace, she is able to be gracious to others. Or if someone is forgiven they are prepared to forgive others. However, this is not the case here. But let’s face it, forgiveness is hard. There’s no forgiveness switch on our hearts that we can simply click on or off when we need more or less of it. I’ve been wondering if forgiveness is like love. You know, when you give away love it multiplies and comes back to you. Theologian David Lose suggests that “if Peter asked Jesus how many times he should love his neighbor, we’d perceive his misunderstanding: love can’t be quantified or counted. But he asks about forgiveness and we miss his mistake… when we realize that forgiveness is not primarily God’s expectation but rather God’s gift, we sink into that mercy and grace and find ourselves more able to turn in mercy and grace toward others.”

But sometimes it seems, in our culture, we are more concerned with punishment than we are with peace. We seem more concerned with revenge than reconciliation. We find it easier to fight than to forgive. I wonder why because we accept God’s extravagant gift of love. We count on God’s mercy and forgiveness yet we are reluctant to give mercy and forgiveness to others. Maybe we feel that we are giving away our power when we forgive. Maybe we are simply afraid of being hurt again and use our grudges to keep us safe. But, at the end of the day, ministry involves risk. Forgiveness is not necessarily an event, but rather a lifestyle. God doesn’t expect us to forgive perfectly every time. But God is encouraging us to live our lives with forgiveness as our North Star. In doing so, we honor God and we help heal the body of Christ. Yes forgiveness is challenging especially as we stand in the shadow of 9/11. Certainly forgiveness cannot erase pain or eliminate the need for justice. Forgiveness is God’s gift to us. Sharing that gift with others takes a sincere move of the Holy Spirit. But forgiveness is possible. God makes all things possible for us.

C.S. Lewis illustrates forgiveness as part of our baptismal identity as Christians. “To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you.” This sisters and brothers is both gift and challenge. Fortunately, forgiveness, like most things, gets easier with practice.

Let the church say, AMEN.