



September 13, 2020  
Matthew 18:21-35  
15th Sunday after Pentecost

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## Forgiveness

There are so many things that I've been looking forward to in my new role as a pastor – and although I had numerous opportunities to learn and practice these things while on internship – well, they didn't exactly feel the same – so for now let's just say they felt “unofficially official.” Baptizing someone, planning and leading worship, chanting the liturgy, leading the prayers of intercession, or presiding over communion or a wedding – these are just some of the amazing moments I have looked forward to as I answered the call to ordained ministry. And even though the power of these moments when performed while “under supervision” and “in training” prior to ordination are still valid, there's just something about finally getting to do them as pastor and them being “officially official.”

But there has been one thing in particular that has continued to bring me a great deal of nervousness and anxiety. For as long as I can remember, the act of confession and forgiveness has always held a frightening yet powerful and deeply meaningful place in my life. Maybe it goes back to my catholic upbringing and the process of reflecting and confessing my sins to the priest. Or, maybe it was more the feeling of peace after the weight of guilt and shame was lifted as I heard those beautiful words of forgiveness being spoken over me.

Regardless of what it is, confession and forgiveness have always spoken to me about the boundless grace of God, even in those moments when I assumed that there could be no way that God would forgive my numerous failings. And now, thinking about being on both sides of the confession and forgiveness coin, I have found myself overwhelmed with the honor of being able to declare God's forgiveness to all sinners and for all sins. “Are you kidding? Me, Jesus? Really? Oh, you can't be serious? Maybe I can just do everything else and leave this part to Pastor Chris.”

In today's Gospel reading, Peter comes to Jesus seeking clarity for what seems like a rather simple and straightforward question. “How many times should a person forgive a brother or sister?” It truly has to be one of the most difficult of human acts, not only to offer forgiveness, but also to receive it. For Jesus to tell this parable means there's a lot at stake here. Why is forgiveness so important? For us? For God? And how much forgiveness is enough? How much do we need to forgive?

In every relationship tension is sure to arise, wrongs are done, lies are told, and trust is broken. And forgiveness, well – it's difficult, it's costly, and it doesn't always seem fair as it challenges our sense of justice and our desire to be vindicated. We all have some barriers that keep us from giving the gift of forgiveness to others. We have a threshold that we don't want to cross, a limit we won't go beyond. Sometimes it looks like anger and revenge – “I'm going to get even!” Or resentment and animosity – “I'm going to stay angry!” Or, remembering and keeping score – “I'll never forget what you did to me!”

And quite honestly, it's a hard truth for me to hear – because I'm inclined toward order and measure. I tend to like the precision and predictability that comes with acquired skills, practice, and accountability. But, if I've learned anything from Matthew thus far, especially Matthew's parables, it's that the Kingdom of God refuses to bend toward our need for reasoning and explanations, or our desire for chartable paths and equations that explain our existence.

It's also a hard truth for me to hear because it sets me down a path of reflection. This is the truth of this passage as well. It sets in motion painful memories of those people I was reluctant to forgive. It pushes me to thoughts

of those waiting for my forgiveness. It reminds of those whom I don't think I can ever forgive. And then I wonder – what's holding me back? What am I expecting to make my forgiveness more acceptable or possible?

But then I also want to know – Jesus, what about those wrongs which are unforgivable – because there are many. And then I'm just not sure what to do with these given Jesus' words. But perhaps it's enough, at least for now, that Jesus makes me think again about the purpose of forgiveness in my life -- when I need it, when I give it, when I hold back; to ask myself, what am I waiting for? What still has to happen?

To follow the one who forgave us all is what it means to be people of forgiveness. C.S. Lewis said that, "To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you." But the longer I wrestle with what I'm coming to understand about forgiveness, the more I'm not exactly convinced that what we need to hear is "just forgive" or "forgive more." And I don't necessarily think that we need another explanation of how we're doing forgiveness is all wrong either. Because truthfully, there is no magic formula to determine what forgiveness should look like or feel like.

Instead, what I think it might be far more helpful is to make space to sit in the discomfort and complexity of what Jesus is doing here – to dwell with how hard forgiveness really is. Because what Jesus is essentially doing is upending the basic structures of how we negotiate relationships.

And let's be honest, we generally feel more comfortable with a way of being with each other that is quantifiable and transactional. We like knowing how much we have to give and what we will get in return – which seems especially true when it comes to forgiveness.

Instead, the question I think we all should be asking ourselves is – why is it that we want and need forgiveness to be quantifiable? I find it ironic that we want to place limits and controls for forgiveness, parameters and structures, conditions and qualifiers. Yet we treasure our freedom and we resist situations and systems that restrict our choice and independence.

So, what is it about forgiveness that exposes this deeper human truth? I wonder if it's because we believe that all of our attempts to understand or make sense of forgiveness, especially God's forgiveness, might somehow secure our own freedom. It seems that the difficulty we have with forgiveness often stems from our resistance to forgive and is rooted even deeper in our resistance to believe that we ourselves can be forgiven.

The hidden truth that the exchange between Peter and Jesus brings to light is that as much as we place controls over when and where and why we forgive others, we first do it to ourselves. And perhaps that's the hardest truth to hear, that we know all too well and have felt all too often the weight of our own unworthiness of forgiveness.

When our own efforts fall short, the beauty of the Good News is that God's mercy is beyond anything we could even imagine, and this truth is proclaimed both by the parable as well as the testimony of Jesus' own life and ministry. On the night when Judas would betray him and Peter and the other disciples would abandon him, Jesus announced to all, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood shed for you and for all people or the forgiveness of sins." And this cup that Jesus lifts up is God's endless well of forgiveness and we are encouraged to make ours the same.

My friends, there is no mathematical formula for grace. Forgiveness is literally, letting go. So, in your giving and receiving of it I invite you to do just that...let go, because that is exactly what God does for each one of us. Brothers and sisters, what does it mean in your life to let go?

In the mercy of almighty God, Jesus Christ was given to die for us, and for his sake God forgives us all our sins. As a called and ordained minister of the Church of Christ, and by his authority, I therefore declare to you the entire forgiveness of all your sins. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit... Thanks be to God. Amen.