



Sunday September 17, 2023
Matthew 18:21-35 (Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost)

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Tony Acompanado

Being forgiven can be painful, because it brings to mind how we've done something wrong or failed, especially when it comes to letting down those we love. Asking for forgiveness is an act of humility. And yet perhaps just as challenging as *asking* for forgiveness is the *granting* of forgiveness. After all, forgiveness heals relationships by requiring us to let go, to turn the page, to refuse the right to hold on to bitterness and anger. Forgiveness then, sets things right again. It sets us free.

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

Peter opens with what he and us, might consider a rather high bar of forgiveness. *Should I forgive someone as many as seven times?* That seems generous, right? After all, aren't second, let alone seventh chances exceedingly rare in our lives? But Jesus, as he often does, poses a radical suggestion – not seven, but seventy-seven times.

So, now not only must we forgive, but we have to do it A LOT! I can almost hear the exchange between Peter and Jesus going something like this:

Peter begins: *"So, Jesus, just how many times should I forgive? Like...seven?"*

Jesus chuckles and while gesturing his thumbs up he responds: *"More than that, my friend."*

Peter comes back, *"Ok, like seventeen?"*

Jesus counters: *"Not even close."*

Peter: *"Wait, like twenty-seven?"*

Jesus: *"Keep going."*

Peter: *"You're kidding, right? Thirty-seven?"*

Jesus: *"Try seventy-seven times."*

Peter: *"But that's ridiculous! It's impossible!"*

Jesus: *"Exactly. Stop trying to put a number on forgiveness, or set a limit for it, or establish parameters for when or when not to forgive, because my dear Peter, forgiveness doesn't work like that."*

Peter: *"UGH!"*

Jesus tells Peter that forgiveness in the kingdom of God must be generous beyond limits. In other words, forgiveness should be our regular practice, our way of life, our default mode. Why? Because we are first and foremost a forgiven people – a people generously forgiven by God. And in light of the abundant grace in which we stand, what possible response can we have, but to pay the wealth of God's forgiveness forward?

In today's Gospel Jesus uses a simple parable about a king settling debts with his servants to illustrate the importance of forgiveness. The message is pretty clear, and it echoes the Lord's Prayer petition that we should forgive others as we've been forgiven.

Let me give you a little information that might help set the stage for what Jesus is teaching. In those days a talent was about 130 lbs. of silver and was the equivalent to about fifteen years of a



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laborer's wages. Which means that the servant owed his master about 150,000 years of labor. In other words, he would never, ever, not in a million years, be able to pay his master back. A denarius, by comparison, was worth about a day's wage, which meant that the second servant owed the forgiven one about a hundred days of labor. No small debt, but still...how could he possibly not overlook that relatively minor debt when he had just been forgiven an impossibly huge one?

In every relationship tension is sure to rise – 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 justified. 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 it sets me down a path of reflection. 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?

And 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's measurable 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.

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.

Forgiveness then is ultimately a decision about the past – the decision to accept both that you cannot change the past and also that the past does not have to hold you captive. Forgiveness is a



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decision about the past that ultimately determines the future. When you forgive, you release the past and enter into an open future. And when you cannot forgive, you remain captive to that past. Forgiveness, in this sense then, is freedom, freedom from the past, freedom for the future – the kind of freedom God wants for all of us.

My friends, the beauty of the Good News is that when our own efforts fall short, God's grace is beyond anything we could even imagine. 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. Thanks be to God. Amen!