



Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
13 September 2026

Ascension Lutheran Church
Rev. Christian W. Marien

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

We do not often use the title of Lead Pastor at Ascension. Yes, it's on the bulletin cover and in the newsletter, but I am not even sure if it is on the website. For me, the briefly used title is a gentle, but grounding, reminder that I am responsible for this community of faith – for this season of ministry – and that one day I will be asked to give account of this congregation's faithfulness while I was trusted with its care. Of course, I am grateful to Pastor Edwin and Pastor Tony, for their partnership and their commitment to walk alongside me and all of you, because they share in the leadership of leading– and the struggles. The staff are partners alongside us. The Church Council walks alongside the pastors. And all of you, as the congregation, at the end of the day, hold the authority to call pastors, pass budgets, purchase land, and without you – well, there is no one to lead at all. So, we have need of each other, pastors and people, walking together to tell the story of Jesus and to serve others to the glory of God. And still, I will tell you - the burden of leading has been entrusted to me. At least that is how I carry the responsibility.

It is no small task to lead a congregation of this size. We are one of only four that worship more than 300 a Sunday out of 114 congregations in the Greater Milwaukee Synod. I share that with you to remind all of us not to take this community of faith for granted. We are indeed – as we have been and pray to continue to be - a beacon on the hill – a light in the darkness – well not us – but Jesus – through us. We are a word of welcome. Here, one will hear a word of peace; a reminder that one is loved, and always, hope. What else should a church be? It is what I strive for in this place and in every place I have served as pastor.

What else should a church be? Today Peter asks the question. “Lord, if my brother or sister sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” No Peter. Seven times? Goodness no! If they can't get it right after you have forgiven them once – let them be dead to you! Move on! They will never get it! They are not worth it! Such a waste Peter. Just once! Anyone checking their bulletins? Uh, Pastor Christ, that's not what Jesus said. But what if it was? It would be so much easier. Cause me harm? Ask for forgiveness. You got it! ONCE. Cause me harm again? Nope, you are outta here. Pack your bags. Ordan an Uber. Dead to me! Any one of you not thought that at least once in your life? Forgiveness is a tricky business.

“Not seven times Peter, but seventy-seven times!” Wait, what? Are you kidding? That is too much. They will never learn. They will just keep sinning again and again. It is too much. That is the point. Forgiveness is tricky business. For everyone, but Jesus. If only, we could read hearts the way Jesus sees them. Is this person really serious? Have they shown the appropriate amount of remorse? Whatever that is. How do we know they won't cause us harm again? We don't. Should we forgive them anyways. Probably.

And then Jesus tells us this story:

Once there was a king who decided to check on his servant' accounts. He had just begun to do so when one of them was brought in who owed him millions of dollars. The servant did not have enough to pay his debt, so the king ordered him to be sold as a slave, with his wife and his children and all that he had, in order to pay the debt. **(Spoiler alert – it still would not have been enough.)** The servant fell on his knees before the king, Be patient with me, he begged, and I will pay you everything. The king felt sorry for him, so he forgave the debt and let him go. **(Forgiveness – plain and simple.)**

²⁸ “Then the man went out and met one of his fellow servants who owed him a few dollars. He grabbed him and started choking him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he said. **(Now this sounds more like how the world works today.)**²⁹ His fellow servant fell down and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back!’ ³⁰ But he refused; instead, he had him thrown into jail until he should pay the debt. ³¹ When the other servants saw what had happened, they were very upset and went to the king and told him everything. **(Because someone always does.)**³² So he called the servant in. ‘You worthless slave!’ he said. ‘I forgave you the whole amount you owed



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me, just because you asked me to. ³³ You should have had mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you.' ³⁴ The king was very angry, and he sent the servant to jail to be punished until he should pay back the whole amount." **(You get what you deserve.)** The question is...who do you want to be? The King who forgives? The servant forgiven? The servant who holds the debt? The king who gives the servant their punishment? The servant who faces his much-deserved punishment? (Which really is all of us.) Except – there is Jesus.

Forgiveness is tricky business. We want it for ourselves. We expect it from others. We believe – we deserve it. Cleaned up – mostly. Made it to church on time. I sing in the choir – doesn't that count for something? Okay Lord I will even make a newborn kit. Does that get me out of this jam? The forgiveness is waiting right? Yes, but not for anything you have done. But only because of what Jesus has done.

Forgiveness is that moment of grace – that so overwhelms it is like the Israelites standing before the Red Sea with Pharaoh breathing down their neck ready to strike. But God is already there– tells Moses to lift his hand – and the waters of the Red Sea part in two and the people of God move forward to freedom. It is this same grace that brings the King to forgive the servant of his debts. It is the gift of God that the Son of God dies for each of us on the cross only to roll away the stone of the dead end to open the way to new life. This is what the church – this church – every church should be about. And with those words I have a confession.

I am a man of somewhat deep faith. Yeah I have my moments of doubt, but this road God invites me to walk alongside all of you is filled with more moments of proof of the presence of God and God's love and joy in this life than I can speak. It is embarrassing. Maybe it is the privilege of pastor to know so many moments of joy in this life, in this community, even in the midst of suffered pain and the power of death – still there is the goodness of God – the joy of life revealed in resurrection moments that reveal themselves again and again. So, now, my confession.

For all the joy of this journey, I can also be a man of little faith. You know what I am talking about.

When Jesus tells the disciples not to worry about anything. Look at the birds in the air. The lilies in the field. Matthew 6:30 - But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?

When the disciples, on the Sea of Galilee are afraid the storm and waves will sink their boat. Matthew 8:26 - ²⁶ And he said to them, "Why are you afraid, you of little faith?" Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a dead calm.

When Peter walks on water and begins to sink? Matthew 14:31 - ³¹ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

Last Sunday, I announced the beginning of our fundraising for school lunches in Tanzania. I have great confidence in the generosity of all of you but also know there is no shortage of need in our community and beyond for the financial resources God offers to you. So, at the end of August, our partnership team received the hoped for fundraising request from our friends in Tanzania. The total for everything requested was \$24,000. I read the email that was sent to our partnership team by Sarah Wehmeier who leads our global partnership team. And my eyes bugged out. \$24,000 that is a lot. We have a budget to meet. Outreach for Hope is launching. We cannot possibly raise \$24,000 in one month – there are too many other needs. So, I replied and said. \$16,500! Let's do lunches. If more comes in – we will see what else, we can do. But \$16,500 that's the amount – HARD STOP! Little faith or Realistic? I prefer the second but confess the first. Not that I have little faith in you, but that I sometimes have little faith in what our God can do.

And then last Sunday, we announced and people lined up at the table after the first service. And then someone talked to me and said, "I will offer a matching gift up to \$8,000. And as of yesterday morning, we had raised \$16,294. I'm sorry, what?! Are you kidding Jesus? So, I confess my little faith and ask for your forgiveness on



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our way to \$24,000 or whatever the Lord sees fit to inspire us to offer. This is the grace of God. It flows from the very heart of God to God's people. It is grace that parts the waters. It is grace that brings the king to forgive our debts. It is grace that speaks a word of forgiveness for my little faith – as genuine as it might be. It is grace that opens a grave to promise eternal life to all who believe. I need that word of forgiveness. I need that word of grace. I am betting you do to. That is what the church should offer to the world on behalf of Jesus. That is what this church strives to do every single day. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.