

17th Sunday after Pentecost
October 1, 2017

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Mount Olive Lutheran Church

Theme: How can I forgive you?
Text: **Matthew 18:21-35**

²¹ Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?”

²² Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

²³ “Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. ²⁵ Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

²⁶ “The servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ ²⁷ The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

²⁸ “But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded.

²⁹ “His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.’

³⁰ “But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. ³¹ When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened.

³² “Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. ³³ Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ ³⁴ In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

³⁵ “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.”

The Word of God we’ll focus on today is the Gospel from Matthew chapter 18. Let’s begin with prayer:

*Jesus, Refuge of the weary, Blest Redeemer, whom we love,
Fountain in life’s desert dreary, Savior from the world above,
Oh, how oft your eyes, offended, Gaze upon a sinner’s fall!
Yet, upon the cross extended, You endured the pain of all. Amen.
(Christian Worship hymn 108 vs. 1)*

“How can I forgive you?”

It’s the question the middle-school girl asks, if only in her own mind, of her classmates who treat her like an outsider and whisper behind her back every day. “How can I forgive you?”

It's the question the middle-aged woman asks, if only in her own mind, of her sister who has gone out of the way to hurt her and never once apologized. After years of bitterness and a family that's in the midst of a cold-war the question hangs in the air with nothing to cut the tension. "How can I forgive you?"

It's the question asked by a child to their father, who's years of neglect or verbal abuse left them wondering if dad ever even loved them at all. "How can I forgive you?"

It's the question on his mind as his wife walks out on their marriage leaving a trail of wreckage behind. It's the question on her mind as her husband comes home late again with the same excuses... the same lies. It's the question that every one of us has spoken, or at least thought when the people closest to us hurt us so deeply... so deeply we don't think we'll ever recover.

"How can I forgive you?"

God's Word in front of us today has something to say about forgiveness. Before we look at that though, let's define what we mean by forgiveness – or better, what God means. In the New Testament the Greek word for "forgiveness" means "to lift away" or "release" – forgiveness means "letting go." But even with a definition so simple the questions already come flooding into our minds, don't they? "Let go? After what he did? After the way she treated me all these years? Do you expect me to pretend it never happened? God, are you telling me that I should just say what happened to me was okay... was no big deal?"

No. That's not what God is saying. The very fact that forgiveness is being discussed means that someone did something very wrong to you. Someone hurt you. They should not have done it. It is not okay. It is a big deal. Forgiveness acknowledges all those things. But then chooses to release the person who wronged you anyways... forgiveness chooses to let go... to let go of your right to get even... your right to be angry... your right to condemn.

Easier said than done.

When I was a kid I once did something really, really stupid. No kids here should ever do this. I took a butter knife and put it into an electrical outlet. I figured that I wouldn't really get zapped too badly and if I did I could just let go of the knife and I'd be fine. Like I said... really stupid. And many of you know why. If you are holding something metal with electric current running through it your hand will clench it and won't let go. If it hadn't been for a friend who had quickly pushed me away from the wall, I suppose things might have gone much, much worse than they did. But for that brief moment I knew what it felt like to hold onto something that could kill you if you didn't release it... all the while being completely unable to let it go.

Do you find yourself holding on to the hurt done to you? Do you have a running count in your mind of the ways you've been wronged by someone in particular? Does it seem impossible at times to open up your hand and let go of it all? Impossible to forgive?

Maybe you find yourself in the Apostle Peter's shoes... standing in front of Jesus as he teaches about forgiveness... asking him, "**Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he**

sins against me? Up to seven times?” (Matthew 18:21). Maybe if I just knew the limits of forgiveness... maybe if I just had a number to shoot for... then forgiveness wouldn't be so hard... but then comes Jesus' answer of **seventy-seven times**... and of course he's not giving a lesson in arithmetic here, but is simply using the play on words to demonstrate what God says elsewhere in Scripture: forgiveness has no limits because it is governed by love. And as God says: **Love keeps no record of wrongs. (1 Corinthians 13:5).**

Maybe Peter, after hearing Jesus' answer to his question, felt like the task Jesus gave him was just not possible. Maybe you feel that way too. Forget seventy-seven times... forget seven times... even one time is too much for me. When I am wronged a voice from deep inside rises up and side-steps Jesus' words... and it screams at the top of its lungs, “But Lord! He said this...! She said that...! They did this to me again! How do you expect me to let that go!?”

And in response to such thoughts Jesus offers a story.

²³ “Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents (millions of dollars) was brought to him. ²⁵ Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

²⁶ “The servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything (as if he ever could!).’ ²⁷ The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

²⁸ “But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii (a few months’ worth of wages). He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded.

²⁹ “His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.’

³⁰ “But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. ³¹ When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened.

The point of the story seems clear enough, does it not? The king is God, we are the servant. We have a debt of sin so large we could never repay it. God canceled that debt. Now we should go show others that same kind of forgiveness as we let go of the debts they owe to us... as we forgive the sins committed against us. “But Lord, that’s too hard!” our sinful nature objects. Well... the Lord isn't done with the story just yet.

³² “Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. ³³ Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ ³⁴ In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

³⁵ “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you (Jesus says) unless you forgive your brother from your heart.”

So is Jesus telling me that I'll end up in an eternal debtor's prison if I don't forgive my brother from my heart? That if I hold a grudge I'll be given the punishment of hell? Yes. That's exactly

what he's telling you and me. To be forgiven and not to be forgiving are two things that cannot coexist in a Christian. If a forgiven sinner has an unwillingness to forgive, a desire to withhold mercy from others, or a need to seek revenge, it can only mean that God's forgiveness means very little to him. In wanting to exact punishment from others, he places himself... herself... under the judgment and justice of a holy God.

Yikes. So where does that leave people like you and me... people who are so naturally prone to anger and vengeance... people who are so unwilling to forgive? Well... it leaves us in the same place as that unmerciful servant... at the beginning of the story.

We stand before God with a debt of sin we cannot pay. The lies, the lust, the laziness, the greed, the gossip, the anger, and every other dark and wicked thought, word, and deed... all of it sits on the scales of justice before God's throne... and piled on top is our inexplicable, inexcusable unwillingness to forgive... And after looking over the record of our sin God turns to us and says: the debt is forgiven. I release you.

But how? How do we end up there again... at the start of the story...? Even after we've been there so many times before? Even though we've left God's throne of grace time and again and then failed to show any grace to those in our lives? Why hasn't he just locked us up already and thrown away the key?

The answer comes from the man who told this story to Peter so long ago... and who rejoices to tell it to us today... and to tell it to us again and again. When God looks at us and says, "How can I forgive you?" Jesus steps into view and answers the question. The best possible person to ever live... the Son of God himself... not only steps into view, but stepped into our place and took on our debts. He was treated in the worst way you could imagine. He was spit on, beaten, scourged, and nailed to a cross. And as his cross was lifted up from the ground and set into place he did what we could never do. He prayed, "**Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.**"

"How can I forgive you?" When God asked this question of us he finds the answer in his Son. And when we ask this question of others... "How can I forgive you?" The answer is the same. Jesus is the answer to the unending cycle of hurt and wrong we impose on our God and inflict on one another. Look... look at Jesus on the cross... look at what happened to him... look at the divine wrath you deserve poured out on his sacred head and piercing him to his core. Look at Jesus and hear him utter, "**It is finished.**" "The debt is paid Father... paid for them all... paid in full."

When you think of your own forgiveness as a small thing, you will always lack the power to forgive anyone else. But when you see Jesus canceling your eternal debt, wiping the slate clean, washing it with his blood... well then... then the floodgates of forgiveness will open in your heart and new things... things you never thought you could say or do will come forth from a heart that has been utterly changed by God's forgiveness in Christ. In Christ all the bitterness, the anger, the hate... they are all gone. So you can let go too.

Forgiveness is hard. And especially hard when you look at others and what they've done to you. But as you leave here today... let the Savior turn your eyes away from others... away from the wrongs and the hurt and the history filled with pain and anger... When it's especially tough to forgive, look... and look... and look at what happened to Jesus... what he did for you... and as you do, God *will* make your heart like his – a heart that's always willing to forgive. Amen.

May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word. Amen. (2 Thessalonians 2:16-17).