

Martin :Luther Toronto I.H.S. September 14, 2014.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ! How good it is to be back here among you; to visit, to worship and to experience something more of your life and ministry! Thank you Pastor Christian, Iris and the Council for your kind invitation and welcome!

Some of you might be acquainted with the stories that Garrison Keilor tells on his PBS radio show about the good Lutheran folk in his mythical village of Lake Woebegone. If not, you should be! Look them up online. Anyway, in one of these anecdotes he describes some fellow named Larry who insisted upon coming to the front of the church in tear filled displays of repentance, where he would crumple at the feet of a very surprised Lutheran pastor. Seven times, he did this, much to the consternation of the good Lutherans of Lake Woebegone.

Keilor writes, "Granted, we're all worthless and vile and have no good in us, but enough is enough! There comes a time in a Christian's life where you have to get on with more important things ... join the church property committee and grapple with problems of the church roof and the church furnace and the church plumbing." As Keilor concludes, "Lutherans like to repent in the same way that they sin. QUIETLY ... DISCREETLY ... AT THE PROPER TIME ... AND WITH A JELLIED SALAD FOR AFTERWARD."

In general, we Lutherans are uncomfortable with demonstrative displays of any kind. That's just the way we are. We don't like things to be too showy or flashy. We prefer discretion and understatement. And because of that there's a part of us that cringes whenever we encounter the kind of straight-forward, cut to the chase accounts that we find in the lessons that are appointed for today. They speak clearly and directly ... almost too much so ... to the heart of conflictual matters that have consumed too much of the church's and humanity's time and energy. But that's the gift of following a lectionary. We are pressed, by an ordered reading of the scriptures to deal with matters that we might prefer to ignore or pass over lightly!

First we read in the account from Romans of a congregation torn by conflict over questions of dietary laws and what day ought to be considered the Sabbath, two issues that were vitally important and deeply divisive within the church that day. (We have our own such issues!) The words of counsel offered in our lesson are words of grace and reconciliation. "Those who believe one way are not to pass judgement on those who believe otherwise ... rather let us do what our conscience dictates knowing that each of us stands before the judgement seat of God ... and not that of one another."

And then the Gospel account which opens with Peter's timeless question to Jesus, "If another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" "No," Jesus replies, "not seven times, but I tell you, seventy times seven times." And then to make his point even clearer Jesus tell us that chilling parable of the servant who expects to be forgiven by the master and who, yet does not forgive a fellow slave. "Should you," Jesus says, "not have mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?"

Ah Peter. How you give me hope! It's heartwarming to know that Jesus must have found Peter almost as annoying as he must find me. And encouraging to know that Peter must have found Jesus as frustrating as I sometimes do!

Peter comes to Jesus with a question. *'How many times should I forgive someone?'* For the record, this is a good question and Peter is suggesting a reasonably gracious response. He does not limit forgiveness to a second chance. He does not subscribe to 'three strikes and you're out' thinking. Seven times, when you think about it, is quite a lot, pretty generous by most counts.

But let's be brutally honest. By asking how much is necessary, Peter is really asking, *'How many times must I do what is right before I can do what I want?'* When will I have done the amount required to finally throw this guy under the bus? But Jesus responds, 'Not seven times I tell you, but *'seventy times seven'* times! That's 490 if you're a little slow on your math!

Scott Evans was the keynote speaker at our recent national youth gathering in Kamloops British Columbia. In his blog this past week he writes about a friend who took this verse to heart as a kid growing up. He used to keep a record of how many times his brother had sinned against him and was looking forward with excitement to the day when he would reach the magic number – 490 - and could stop forgiving him.

The challenge of such literalism is that it distracts us from Jesus' intention and mission. Jesus did not come to clarify the numbers. He came to free us from them. He came to free us from Peter's question about 'How much is enough?' because for God, there is no 'enough'!

The real point is found in the question that we are left with when Jesus tells his clarifying parable to Peter. The parable of the unmerciful servant leads us to a question, the question which is the whole point of today's gospel lesson. *'What is your response to being forgiven?'*

Considering that a talent is worth about 16 years of work, the first slave in the parable is forgiven an obscene sum of money. If that number is correct, 10,000 talents is around 160,000 years at an average wage. Jesus is talking about a 'Wall Street financial crash' amount of money. The king is forgiving a first century Bernie Madoff despite the destruction his greed has wreaked on individuals, families and communities.

The slave realizes he is in trouble. He begs for forgiveness. He pleads for more time and gets it! And yet, no sooner has he left, he confronts a man who owes him a hundred denarii (about 3 month's wages). He grabs him by the throat, chokes him and *demand*s to be given what he is owed.

This not just a commandment to forgive, it is a meditation on what *unforgiveness* says about *what we believe*. The unmerciful servant believes that what he owes is trivial — but what is owed to him is crucial. He believes that he deserves to be forgiven — while the other slave deserves to have his debt choked out of him. He, in his heart, believes that he is the master, that he is the judge of who owes what and whose debt matters. And this is the road we lead our hearts down when we refuse to forgive.

This is Jesus way; the right way to go. But I would be lying if I told you that this was an easy or comfortable way to go. In truth, it is a tough and a painful way to go, a path that is not easy, a way of discipleship that costs.

Let me close by sharing a little story that I first heard from a wonderful teacher named Fred Craddock. The story opens with a family out for a Sunday drive in the station wagon. All it proceeding according to plan when suddenly the two kids start pounding their father on the back hollering, "Daddy, daddy ... stop the car ... there's a little kitten sitting back there on the side of the road."

"So what." "But daddy ... you just have to go back and pick it up." "Oh no I don't!" But daddy ... please." "Please shmeeze ... there are already to many animals living in our house ... we don't have any room." "We never thought our daddy would be so mean as to let a little kitten die." And on and on it goes until finally the mother turns to her husband and says, "Dear, I think you're going to have to stop."

And so, he turns the car around, returns to the spot and pulls off to the side of the road. "You kids stay in the car." He goes around the back of the car to pick up the little kitten. The poor creature is just skin and bones ... all sore eyed and full of fleas ... weak and tired. But when he reaches down to pick it up ... with its last bit of energy the kitten bristles, baring tooth and claw. It spits and scratches him right across the arm. With a curse, he picks the kitten up by the loose skin at the neck ... brings it over to the car. "Don't touch it," he cautions, before dropping it in the back of the wagon, "it's probably got leprosy or something." When they get home the children give the kitten several baths ... about a gallon of milk ... and then they start with the intercessions. "Can we let him stay in the house just tonight. Tomorrow we'll fix a place in the garage. Can he please?" Sure, why don't you give him my bed," father replies, having wisely conceded the battle. And so kitty moves into the household and several weeks pass.

Then one day, the father walks in, feels something rub against his leg, looks down and there is the cat. After carefully looking around to make sure nobody is watching, he slowly reaches down his hand to touch the kitten. But when the cat sees his hand ... it doesn't bear its claws and hiss. Instead it arches its back contentedly to receive his caress. Is that the same cat. Of course it isn't. It's not the same as that frightened, hurt, hissing, scratching kitten on the side of the road. Of course not. And you know as well as I do what made the difference.

The next time God reaches out his hand to bless you ... look at his hand and you will see that it is covered with scratches. Such is the hand of love ... extended to those who are bitter ... those who are angry ... and hurting. Such are the hands of any who would pretend to take upon themselves the mantle of servant ... the name of Christian.

The answer is to Peter's question is not seven, nor 77, nor 490. The answer is 'blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy.' (Matthew 5:7) The answer is 'forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.' (Matthew 6:12) The answer is 'forgive them Father for they do not know what they do.' (Luke 23:34) In essence, Jesus' answer to Peter's question – our

question - is this. 'Forget about the math. You just start forgiving and I'll tell you when to stop.'
This is the word of the Lord! AMEN.

Bishop Michael Pryse