

Sunday Sermon for Martin Luther Church

15th Sunday after Pentecost, September 13, 2020

Reading: Matthew 18:21-35

21 Peter came and said to [Jesus], "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" 22 Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

23 "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. 24 When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; 25 and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. 26 So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' 27 And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. 28 But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' 29 Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' 30 But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. 31 When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. 32 Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33 Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' 34 And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. 35 So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

Sermon by Vicar Jordan Smith

Grace and peace to you, In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

What is the largest debt you've ever owed? For many of us, that might be your mortgage. Or your business loan. For the students among us, OSAP loans that we have been paying back dutifully for years. Or it might be credit card debt from a time in our life where we kept spending and spending while the balance of our card grew higher and higher.

With all these examples, you knew you were spending the money. But there can still be a moment of shock, maybe when the monthly bill gets opened, or five years in to paying our mortgage, we still owe how much?

How much do we owe? That's part of the question that Peter is thinking about in this passage. We read here in the latter half of chapter 18, following instructions about Jesus welcoming children, about taking away those things that cause you to stumble, and then guidelines for how to repair relationships among those in the church when one sins against another, Peter wants some clarification. Okay, we need to welcome the children. Yes, need to search for the one sheep. Yes we need to be open with others about when they hurt us and pray that they will recognize their sin so that they can be reconciled. But, how many times do I need to forgive them?

The answer is a big number. If you read this passage in a study Bible, you'll likely see a note included, giving you some context for how the numbers are working in this passage.

Peter asks if he needs to forgive seven times. If you're interested in the significance of numbers, this might be the number he uses as seven is considered a perfect number, Peter might be asking if he needs to forgive perfectly. Jesus replies, and here you might have different responses depending on the translation you use, that Peter must forgive 77 times, or 70 times 7. With either understanding, it's a big number, more than perfect, perhaps even feeling unattainable.

And then the parable starts, with a king who wants to settle accounts, and so a slave is brought to him who owes 10,000 talents. Now receiving this bill isn't like someone who has gone out shopping for new clothes and a TV, with maybe some sports equipment added on and then, let's say, five Tesla's added on. This is like opening your Mastercard bill and it says you owe \$10 billion. There's no way you could have spent that, there's no way you could owe that, and there's definitely no way you can pay that back. This is a debt seemingly based on nothing you have done, but it's there, and then the only thing you can do is ask for mercy.

The story goes on though, because the slave comes across one of his fellow slaves, one who owed him about 100 day's wages. But instead of remembering the freedom from 150,000 years of wages he has just been granted, he puts the fellow slave into prison. And those around who know the whole story, who have seen this whole situation play out, aren't impressed. They turn him in and the king turns from forgiveness to punishment.

What is our responsibility to forgive the debt of others, when we have been forgiven a great debt?

Those words should sound familiar, and we'll say words like them a bit later in the service. Because twelve chapters earlier, Jesus has given a very similar lesson. When teaching his disciples to pray using the words of the Lord's prayer, the lines are included: "forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us." Or, forgive us our trespasses (or our debts), as we forgive our debtors (or those who trespass against us).

There's a repetition, or a cycle here. We are forgiven, so we can forgive. We forgive, and then we ask for forgiveness. How do we forgive and how many times? Beyond perfection, seventy-seven times, because God has forgiven a debt that is so much greater.

I want to take a moment though, to give us a word of caution. Because in the history of the church, and in society, this passage has been used not for the healing of people, but to hurt people. It's been used to encourage people to remain in abusive relationships, to hold people back from asking for respect, and to dehumanize those who had less power. And that can happen when we disconnect verses 21-35 from the six verses that precede it. Charles Campbell explains it well, and I'd like to quote him here: "The forgiveness spoken of by Jesus in this passage is set within the communal process ... that includes naming the sin, the repentance of the sinner, and, where necessary, the communal support of the victim. It is a challenging, potentially public process that does not minimize the sin and that provides resources to support and empower the one who has been sinned against. Only within this process does Jesus call us to forgive other church members countless times. The forgiveness Jesus calls for is inseparable from truth telling and accountability within the church." (1)

(1) Charles Campbell, "Homiletical Perspective on Matthew 18:21-35," in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year A*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 4 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2A011), 71.

Truth telling, accountability, and forgiveness are inseparable. When others recognize their sin, they are forgiven. As we see ourselves as the one owing a great amount in today's parable, as we recognize the burden facing us, we acknowledge those words said in our confession at the beginning of the service, "we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves." God, the king, makes us recognize our full burden, but from under this weight, we are released by the king, no longer held down but lifted up. We are reminded of the need to forgive those who wrong us, those who recognize their wrong, constantly, without end, because we are forgiven, constantly, without end. It is for our benefit, to release and to remember our freedom, and it is for the benefit of the other, to remind them of their state as one who is forgiven.

One of the other assigned readings for today is the last chapter of Genesis, chapter fifty. Quickly, Joseph's brothers, who sold him into slavery and told their father he was dead, ended up reunited with him in Egypt during a drought. They have been welcomed, given prime land, and overall it looks like Joseph has forgotten what happened to him years earlier. But their father, Jacob, dies, and as the entire family has travelled to the land of Canaan to bury him, the brothers start questioning their situation. We read in verse 15: **Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers said, "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?"**

Now there's a lot more great stuff in there, but we'll stop at that point. I encourage you to read Genesis 50 this week, or the entire Joseph story. At this point, the brothers are questioning whether Joseph has forgiven them. No amount of privilege granted to them, or vulnerability by Joseph travelling out of Egypt to bury his father have convinced them of their reconciled state with their brother. Joseph has not said the words: "I forgive you." The brothers have turned away from their past abuses. His brothers have changed. This is not a cheap sense of asking for forgiveness. They have demonstrated that they recognize the pain they have caused. Pharaoh, a judge of character, has granted them land. The family has been reunited. This check off all the boxes of reconciling relationships that Jesus talks about in chapter 18. The process where sins between members of the community are identified, pointed out, publicly acknowledged if necessary, and relationships healed.

And this is what Jesus shows in his parable. The perpetrator, owing more than he could possibly every owe, is forced by the king to recognize his debt. Recognize what is owed. And in the anguish of that pain, of realizing that there is nothing he can do to save himself and his family, he falls on his knees and asking for patience, he receives mercy.

He hears the words that grant him freedom, release from what he owes. And Jesus reminds us that the release we feel from this forgiveness, we are called to model and share with others. Because in offering forgiveness to others, we are speaking the words of God. Luther writes in the Large Catechism about confession; *"Note, then, as I have often said, that confession consists of two parts. The first is our work and act, when I lament my sin and desire comfort and restoration for my soul. The second is a work that God does, when he absolves me of my sins through the Word placed on the lips of another person. This is the surpassingly grand and noble thing that makes confession so wonderful and comforting."* (2)

Just as the servant feels relief, we can offer that same relief to others, not through our own powers, but in our ability to voice out loud what God has stated – that you are forgiven.

(2) Robert Kolb, Timothy J. Wengert, and Charles P. Arand, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 478.

Powerful words. Strong words. We heard those words this morning already in our time of confession and forgiveness. But we hear them again. You are forgiven.

We say them again and again. We are forgiven.

Because others need to hear them. You are forgiven.

Because we need to hear them. I am forgiven.

Because in the repetition, of seventy times seven, in the constant, never-ending, struggle against us not being perfect, we can hear the reassurance that we are enough. That God loves you. That Jesus died for you. That forgiveness has been offered and that you can remind yourself of that as much as you need to, but also that those around you, your friends, people in the church, your pastor, are called to be the voice that says it when you can't say it yourself.

You are forgiven. And may those words change us in ways that we can't help but say them to others.

The Peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen

Martin Luther Evangelical Lutheran Church

2379 Lake Shore Blvd. W, Toronto, ON M8V 1B7

Office: (416) 251 8293, Cell: (416) 567-2487, churchoffice@martinluther.ca,, www.martinluther.ca

Vicar Silke Fahl, vicarfahl@martinluther.ca, Cell: 905-717-5937

Vicar Adam McComb, vicarmccomb@martinluther.ca, Vicar Jordan Smith, vicarsmith@martinluther.ca

Organist & Choir Director: Linda Marcinkus

*Member of Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada (ELCIC) &
Partnered with Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (EKD)*