

King of Glory Lutheran Church – September 16-17, 2017

Year A: Pentecost 15 Matthew 18:21-35

Forgiveness 77

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*Forgiveness is a gift and a journey.*

May God's grace and forgiveness help us to forgive in Jesus Christ's name. Amen

How often do I have to forgive her? The disease is getting worse and my patience runs thin. This little gold band on my finger is a promise through sickness and health, and I made that promise. But she says things that are so hurtful. I'm giving every ounce of energy to her care and well-being and she picks at me about the littlest things! I don't care about the dirty dishes. I care about getting a meal on the table and getting her fed! I am trying to forgive my wife Jesus. I am trying.

Seventy-seven times, Jesus? You've got to be kidding! Every time we're in a meeting together, he manages to say something demeaning about women – at least twice. But who is counting, right? Sometimes it's obvious, but most often the comments just reinforce the good-old-boys club around here. Why do they hire women anyway when it's clear they think we aren't capable of producing quality work? Should I do the math – that would be way too depressing. A weekly meeting, at least two comments a meeting, that's eight times a month not counting the passive aggressive emails, and you ask me to forgive him seventy-seven times for each count? Lord have mercy, I can't do that!

So what about my service? What about my time at war? You don't know anything about my experience. The nights I couldn't go to sleep because my ears were strained towards hearing anything unusual. You don't know anything about my loneliness while on tour and the family I left behind. Little Suzy was only seven months old. She didn't get to know her daddy. And now? Now I've got hearing loss and PTSD and I can't figure out who is running the house – my wife and kids or me? But you – you want to tell me that my time overseas wasn't good enough. We didn't get the job done, huh? Could you have done what I did in Afghanistan? You have no idea what I did. And I don't have any skills to offer any company once I come back home? You want to write me off like I'm some fly. I don't want to forgive you for badmouthing the military. I want you to take my service to this country and my life seriously.

Here at church, we speak so often of forgiveness. It's a word in our common vocabulary. We toss that three syllable word around every week like it's a Frisbee hoping that you'll catch it – or it will catch you. Or God will catch us with forgiveness. But wow –trying to catch onto and hold a Frisbee isn't that easy. And forgiveness isn't either.

Peter asks Jesus how many times a member of the church needs to forgive another member of the church. Seven times? It's a number that more than satisfies the letter of the law in the ancient world and seems really gracious to most of us. But then Jesus comes back with a number which seems even more ridiculous! 77 is golly Molly a whole lot of times to forgive one person for the same sin.

Now remember that St. Matthew is committed to deep discipleship. Matthew wants us to know how to walk the walk and talk the talk. So he doesn't cut corners – he calls it as he sees it. But Matthew also exaggerates things to the point of overstatement, embellishing and amplifying so that we know just how important a topic is!

But a quick look at the story Jesus tells demonstrates that this forgiveness thing is no small matter. Landowners owned the land and everything on it – including the slaves. Apparently, the slave owed his landowner 10,000 talents. Keep in mind one talent equaled about 130 lbs. of silver. It would have taken a laborer about 15 years to earn one talent. This slave owed 10,000 talents. That would be about 150,000 years of labor. Impossible! Unattainable! Ridiculous! But that debt is forgiven by the king. Wiped clean. Gone! Incredible!

So this guy turns around and as he's walking home, the weight of the world lifted off his shoulders, he runs into a buddy, who owes him 100 denarii. One denarii equaled about one day's wage. The slave is due about 100 days, about 11 weeks of work from his fellow slave. That's not a small amount –but in light of what he himself has just been forgiven of? Yet – he throws his buddy into prison. The irony is palpable.

And yet, how often do we find ourselves in the shoes of the slave who received forgiveness and then not wanting to offer it to others.

It's not the little injustices right? It's not the slight hurt that might not even warrant an apology in your eyes. Those things are easy to forgive. Or when your contrite heart is overcome with love that comes easily – that kind of forgiveness isn't so difficult. It's forgiving the hurts that run deep. Those hurts that find a

canyon bed which will never see the light of day. Then forgiveness gets hard and we're pulled towards acting like the slave.

Throw her in prison, until she can pay me back. I want quid pro quo. Nothing less than equal payment will do. Ever feel like that? The parts of our human nature that enjoy the power we have in holding it over another's head – in withholding forgiveness.

Or we actually like to keep rubbing the wound that hurts. Whenever we remember that particular conversation it still says, "Ouch." And repeating those painful words only increases our pain which then increases our desire for revenge or at least to continue disliking the person who said it. We carry them with us, don't we? We wrestle with those we haven't forgiven – those we need to forgive – those who are waiting for our forgiveness. Then when the pain of the past gets too heavy to carry and we can't seem to figure out how this forgiveness thing works, then we let them once again sink into the deep end of the pool laying there as dead to us for a while longer. I don't have to confront my own feelings nor theirs.

Until the next time. Right? Because undoubtedly that pain will resurface until we act upon it. God desires our healing. God longs for us to be whole in relationship.

Forgiveness can be a tough business from what I've heard. Forgive and forget, right? If we forgive then it means we're weak. Forgiveness means going back to get abused some more.

No way! Not true – any of what I just said. Those are myths about forgiveness and they are not true!

God doesn't ask us to forgive just that we might be hurt more or somehow forget the memory of that hurtful day. God doesn't ask us to be weaklings or doormats. God doesn't even ask us to return to a hurtful relationship if it will continue to be hurtful.

So let's get a few myths about forgiving out of the way. Lewis Smedes, author of The Art of Forgiving; When You Need to Forgive and Don't Know How (Ballantine Books. Random House Ballantine Publishing Group. 1996) tackles these myths. He says the following.

Forgiving someone who did us wrong does not mean that we tolerate the wrong he did. Forgiving does not mean that we want to forget what happened. Forgiving does not mean we excuse the person who did it. Forgiving does not

mean we take the edge off the evil of what was done to us. It doesn't mean we surrender our right to justice. Forgiving does not mean we invite someone who hurt us once to hurt us again. (Pg. 55-56)

Smedes asserts we are qualified to forgive if we were wounded, if we were wronged and if we have a desire to forgive. (Pg. 46) He claims that the act of forgiving is as natural to us as crying is to a baby or blooming is to a flower bud. Forgiveness is part and parcel of being a human. "We forgive when we discover we really want to forgive, and we want to forgive when we want to heal ourselves from the hangover of a wounded past." (Pg. 69)

What happens when we forgive is that we first begin to see the person behind their words or anger or abuse, instead of only seeing their words, anger or abuse. When we can begin to see that person is someone like me, wounded myself, then we're beginning to move towards forgiveness.

My husband is really stressed at work and perhaps that's why he lashed out again tonight. My friend's cancer is back and underneath her bite is fear about the unknown. My brother doesn't know how to navigate feelings very well and he simply doesn't know how much that hurts, because I haven't told him.

God who created us all equal as sinners, knows that forgiveness can come easily for some and is very difficult for others. Forgiveness is a gift when we're ready to move from hurt into healing, from pain into peace, from guilt into grace. God helps us do it – even if we have to practice 77, 88 or 99 times.

For heaven's sake, the Church had to practice 500 years before Lutherans and Catholics could forgive the sins of our past relationship. And for heaven's sake, God has forgiven each of us 150,000 sins long before we've forgiven others a piddly 100. Praise be to God for that. Forgiveness has layers and takes time. With God's help, and with God's power and grace behind us, let's keep practicing God's natural art of forgiveness. Amen.