

The Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost

October 9, 2011

Amazing Grace Lutheran Church - Pastor Chip Wilke

Matthew 18:21-35

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?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. 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. "The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. "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. "His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' "But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. "Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart." (NIV)

All morning long mom is busy cleaning the carpets & sweeping and mopping the kitchen floor. Meanwhile little Petey is also busy playing in the backyard getting as dirty as a little boy can get. Mom just finishes up and puts her feet up for a minute when in comes Petey over the kitchen floor and halfway across the clean carpets before mom sees the muddy tracks. "Petey what are doing I just cleaned in here!," mom yells. Petey looks down saying: "I'm sorry mom." And with a merciful heart mom says: "I forgive you, now go upstairs, clean up, and play while I take care of this mess."

So mom is at it again. A cleaned up Petey is also at it again this time with play-doh and frosting and before mom sees it Petey has for the second time made a mess out of the clean floor and carpets. Mom can't believe her eyes and calls Petey over and asks: "What were you doing? How could you make such a mess when you know I spent all day cleaning?" With a sad look Petey looks up and says: "I'm so sorry mom." Filled with compassion, mom gives her little boy a hug and once again says: "I forgive you, let's clean this up together, and then we can play a game."

But later that day mom tells Petey to go outside while she prepares supper. Mom doesn't notice the light rain, but Petey does and he makes sure to jump in every little puddle that starts to form. Then you guessed it, he comes running through the house wet and muddy and for the third time in one day messes up mom's clean floors. Mom walks in and by now the pot on the stove isn't the only thing steaming. This time before mom can

even say a word Petey looks and realizes what he has done. He starts to cry and runs up to his mom and begs for her forgiveness. In love, mom reassures her son: *"I love you and I forgive you."*

Dear friends, Peter's question today is a real and tremendously important one for all of us. ***"Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?"*** I pray we all listen closely to Jesus' answer. I pray we learn to practice in our Christian lives what our Savior preaches. My prayer today is that: **The Lord of Mercy Gives us Forgiven, Forgiving Hearts.**

Peter has to believe he is being pretty generous when he says *"shall I forgive up to seven times."* The Jewish Talmudic teaching was that to forgive the same sin three times was sufficient. Peter's seven appears to be charitable. Yet, Jesus' answer reveals Peter falls very short of God's understanding of mercy. Whether Jesus says I tell you not seven but 77 or 7 times 70 - the point is we are to forgive a person *every* time the sinner repents. God's forgiveness does not have limits. His mercy has no end.

To make this point Jesus, as He does so wonderfully and often, tells a parable. A servant owes his king ten thousand talents. Scholars estimate this amount to be over 20 million today. How this servant got himself into such a debt we are not told, but the point is this is a debt he could never pay. When the king is ready to settle this account he is going to take all this man had and then throw this servant in jail where he belongs. Desperate, this man falls on his knees, saying he will do all he can to pay it back, even though again it was impossible. All this servant could do is beg and plead before his master.

Here is where the parable takes a surprising turn - ***'The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.'*** Just like that, without the servant paying a penny, it was over. The Master was moved by a heart of compassion. He took pity on this unworthy servant. He showed mercy - unbelievable, astounding mercy! He simply *cancelled* the man's huge debt, one he could never have repaid, and let him go.

We know this to be more than a parable, don't we? We know from experience this is how our God deals with us in Christ Jesus. What is the biggest debt in the world? Have you seen the billboard of the growing debt of the U.S? It is a huge number which goes up and up and up. Not even that number is as large as the debt we owe God because of our many sins! Pick any commandment - the first, the third, the eighth, and think about how many times we have sinned against it. Think about all our sins of commission - acts in words and deed that rebel against God's good will. Consider all our sins of omission - all the things that we do not do that God asks of us.

When we think about our sins we begin to realize we owe our Maker big time. We, like the servant in this parable, deserve to lose everything we have, to be locked up and have the key thrown away forever. But then the Lord of mercy does something surprising for us. God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us. And God laid on Him the iniquity of us all. In His mercy God gave us His own beloved Son. In love for us God punishes His own beloved Son on a cross in order to cancel our debt of sin. Filled with compassion, Christ wipes away all our sins with His innocent blood. To have mercy on us Jesus dies and before He dies our Savior from the cross proclaims it finished -that our sins are paid for in full. His empty grave is the receipt to remind us the debt is cancelled.

Our merciful Lord gives us the good news from prophets like Isaiah: ***“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for” (Isaiah 40).*** We are able to go free - go forgiven. What a comfort it is to hear the good news *take heart your sins are forgiven.* What a joy to live with a forgiven heart - a heart free of sin and guilt. The Lord of mercy gives us forgiven hearts. Jesus gives us forgiven hearts so that they may be forgiving hearts. How can we be shown such astounding mercy then go out and not show mercy to those who sin against us? How can we, who have experienced true grace, withhold forgiveness from any sinner who repents? The Lord also wants to give us forgiving hearts.

Jesus makes this clear in this parable. The servant whose debt was cancelled now goes out and finds someone who owes him. He owes 100 denarii to be exact, which is about 100 day's wages. This sum is significant but only a drop in the bucket compared to his ocean of debt that was cancelled. This servant begged for mercy and promised to pay him back. But this servant who had been shown great mercy showed none and threw his fellow servant in jail. The others servants greatly upset by what they had seen run to the king. The master calls this servant in and says: ***'You wicked servant, '... 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.***

Then applying this lesson Jesus teaches: ***"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."*** It is a matter of the heart. If we want others to have to pay for their sins against us then we are telling God that we should pay for ours. And if we want to pay our own way, then the price is hell! That's why Jesus teaches us to pray: ***“And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”*** Jesus knows that grudges and malice and anger and hatred and revenge and jealousy are poison to our soul.

I may have told this story before but I believe it is fitting. After the civil war was over General Lee was returning home to the south and on his way a woman came out to him in tears and with a whole lot of anger. She pointed to a big tree in the front of her yard. The tree was beat up and just about dead. She said: *“look at it General look what those Yankees did to my beautiful tree. They killed it. It had been in my family for years and years and those good for nothing people ruined it. They just ruined it.”* The General turned to her and said: *“Lady, just cut it down and forget it.”* What wonderful advice! She needed to let it go. She needed to forgive. She needed to cut it down and forget it or every time she went out in her front yard and saw that tree she would have those angry thoughts about the war and what happened to her prized tree. So get rid of it.

Yet, isn't that easier said than done? C.S. Lewis once said: *“Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea until they have something to forgive.”* It is tough to let go when someone really hurts us? We have trouble forgiving let alone forgetting. How often have we held grudges against others - even against our fellow believers? How many times have we walked away from God's full and free forgiveness and then been stubborn to forgive or even worse unforgiving like the servant in this parable?

That is why it is my prayer today that the Lord of mercy give us forgiven, forgiving hearts. The Lord grants such hearts as He keeps taking us back to His mercy. For instead

of condemning us, God on a tree at Calvary punished Jesus saying: "*You wicked, unmerciful, unforgiving servant. You will not leave this tree until you have paid the last penny.*" Pay it Jesus did - right up to His last breath. Then coming out of His grave after paying our debt, Jesus doesn't speak words of anger or revenge, but instead words of comfort and love: "***Peace, peace be with you.***" "*Your sins are forgiven.*" How many times should mom forgive little Petey in one day? Up to seven times? How many times should we forgive those who sin against us? Listen to Jesus. Learn from Jesus. Go now and forgive one another just as in Christ God has forgiven you. Amen.