

"Forgiveness – God's Way"

Matthew 18:21-35

September 17, 2017

15th Sunday After Pentecost

There are a number of things in our lives which we understand to be important, but we don't really take them seriously. For example, we all know how important it is to exercise. However, when advised to exercise, we don't take it seriously. Oh, we may get up early in the morning and go to the gym for a few days, but soon were back to sleeping in every morning. Eating right is another example of this. We are told to eat less red meat, more fruits and vegetables, and less sugar and fat. We know this is true, but we don't take it seriously. We try a diet for a day or two and then we go back to our regular way of eating.

I think we treat the forgiveness of sins in the same way. Oh, we talk a lot about the forgiveness of sins, especially here in church. It is the main focus of every worship service. We say that forgiveness is very important in our spiritual lives. However, do we really take forgiveness all that seriously?

Stop and think about it. We don't really ask for forgiveness a lot when we experience conflict with someone else. We don't actually say, "Please forgive me." We may mumble a brief, "I'm sorry," but that's about it. Mostly, we simply remain silent. Often, we simply allow a conflict with someone to fester until it hopefully goes away.

We also don't offer forgiveness to those who have sinned against us. When someone mumbles that very generic and forced, "I'm sorry," what do we say? We say things, such as "No worries!"; "That's all right, "; "No problem!"; and so on. It's as if we can't even bring ourselves to even say the word "forgiveness", much less offer it to someone who has offended us.

Why don't we take forgiveness seriously? Maybe it's because we don't take sin seriously. People consider sin very narrowly. Much of our culture's bad moral behavior is lumped together under "poor choices" or "inappropriate actions" which really don't need forgiveness. Sins, however, (if they are ever even considered) are limited to those actions which are really, really bad. As a result, many people don't even think they need forgiveness since they haven't done anything majorly wrong.

Besides, why worry about sin? There doesn't seem to be the belief that sin has any real consequences. If someone sins against us, it may inconvenience us or hurt our feelings, but it's no big deal. We may learn to accept sin or, at least, tolerate it.

This means forgiveness is not all that important to many people. We react to sin against us by either brushing it away with pious platitudes or ignoring it altogether. If forgiveness is even considered, it may be seen only as something that may salve our consciences and make us feel better. However, many don't even seem to need that.

Even in the Church, forgiveness seems to be less and less important, despite the fact that we talk about it all the time. People don't seem to feel the need to come running to church in order to receive forgiveness for their sins through the means and in the location where God has promised to give it. If sin is the one universal fatal

disease which the Bible says it is, why aren't people packing this place? We don't take sin seriously and we don't take forgiveness seriously.

But God does. God take sin very seriously and, therefore, He takes forgiveness very seriously. We see this in our text for today which is Jesus' parable of the Unforgiving Servant. The story is told by Jesus in response to Peter's inquiry, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As much as seven times?" Peter sees forgiveness as a necessary, but undesirable, ritual which the Christian must do. He is not interested in the benefit of forgiveness or how forgiveness can serve him and his neighbor. Peter just wants to know how often do I have to do it? Now, Peter thinks he is being quite generous and magnanimous. The usual requirement was three times a day. Peter was doubling that in adding one more. How noble is he!

To help us understand and appreciate the whole concept of sin and forgiveness, Jesus sets the story in a financial context, rather than a religious or spiritual context. In other words, Jesus' story does not talk about "sin" or "trespasses". Jesus talks about a financial debt. This is entirely appropriate. The Greek word for the term "trespasses" which we speak in the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us", literally means "debt" and used to be translated that way: "forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." If you have ever heard the Lord's Prayer sung as a solo, you've heard it sung that way before. This gets our attention immediately. While we may not know or be interested in lofty spiritual matters, we do know the meaning of debt and are certainly interested in that.

Instead of speaking of forgiving sins, Jesus' parable talks about canceling debt. This gets our attention, too. While we may not be all that interested in having sins forgiven, we are certainly interested in having our debts paid for or canceled for us.

Also, in His story, Jesus explicitly says that there is punishment for those who fail to pay their debt. While we may not be interested in the consequences of our unforgiven sin, either by us or directed toward us, we are certainly interested in the consequences for unpaid debts.

The story deals basically with three different people. The first person is the first servant. He owes his master 10,000 talents. His master, who is having a day of financial reckoning for his accounts, demands payment in full. The servant does what any person would do: he promises to pay if given more time. However, when doing the math, we see that this is impossible. A common day laborer at the time would have to work 60 million days to pay off the debt. If this servant had an extraordinarily high paying job and never took a day off, he would still have to work at least 1000 years to make amends.

For the master to order this slave to be sold, along with his family and all that he had, was perfectly legal and just. I think we might have favor that way. Throw the bum in jail. Make him pay. However, the master doesn't do this. He doesn't give the servant more time to pay a debt which he owes but could never pay. Rather, he takes pity on the servant and forgave him the debt. The debt was canceled and counted as good is paid.

The second person in the story is the second servant. His debt is small, but significant it amounts to about three months' pay. He could probably pay it back. However, the first servant pays no attention to his pleas for mercy in which he uses almost the exact same words that the first servant had used in his plea. Again, there is a call for justice. The first servant demands that the second servant pay his debt in full. When he doesn't, he has him thrown in the same jail which he would likely have occupied.

Again, I think we might have agreed with the first servant. We would demand justice. If someone owes us money, we demand and expect payment. The first servant learns nothing from his master's display of pity, mercy, and forgiveness of debt. Instead, he throws his fellow servant into jail until he can pay.

The third person (and most important person) in this story is the King. While he has every right to expect payment and would be quite just to punish those who did not pay, whether they could pay or not, the king has pity on the first servant. The Greek word here doesn't mean just to feel sorry for the man. It refers to a deep feeling of compassion from the gut which displays itself in mercy, that is acts of kindness. The king extends unconditional forgiveness of the entire debt and saves him from any time in debtor's prison.

When told of the first servant's actions toward the second servant, the King is enraged. He expects that mercy will be shown as mercy has been received. Therefore, he not only retracts the forgiveness of the debt the first servant, but he also reinstates the punishment which will last until the debt is paid off – which will be forever.

This story shows how seriously God takes sin and forgiveness. Our debt (that is, our sin) is even greater than the first servant's debt in the story. Our debt is increased, not only when we do something forbidden by God's Commandments, but also whenever we fail to do the good which God demands in His Commandments. If that was not a high enough debt, we learn from God's Word that God also judges our words and our thoughts. Even the smallest of thoughts or the tiniest of words which show evil or failed to show good increase our debt. The possibility of us paying off our debt is even more impossible than the first servant. God requires perfection and holiness, standards which we can never get back to on our own. We deserve the debtor's prison of hell.

The king in this story represents God, our king. He has had pity on us, even when there was no reasonable expectation of it. His pity moved him to show mercy upon us and He has canceled our debt of sin. Only instead of ignoring the debt or writing it off the books as the King in the story seem to do, God pays the debt Himself through His Son, Jesus Christ, with his own blood shed on the cross. He paid our debt in our place by giving up his life on that cross. He took that punishment for every wrong thought, every wrong word, and every wrong action so that we would be free from that punishment. He paid the price which we could not pay ever. And God the Father led him out of debtor's prison by raising Him from the dead, never to die again.

While God's mercy toward us and forgiveness of our debt of sin is unconditional and requires nothing of us, God does have expectations about how we are to use that mercy. He expects us to receive His mercy and His forgiveness with joy and gratitude and to freely share that mercy and that forgiveness with love and humility. If we do not share His mercy and forgiveness, but keep it only for ourselves, He, like the King in the parable, will retract the forgiveness and reinstate the punishment. Of the king's anger and punishment in the parable, Jesus says, "So also my heavenly Father will do to everyone of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

So, where is our place in this parable? We are the first servant with a huge and unpayable debt. We are to freely receive God's grace and forgiveness for all of our debt with joy and thanksgiving. And, no matter how high our debt ever gets, we trust God's mercy. We live competently, knowing that all our debt has been paid and forgiven.

As disciples of Jesus Christ, we stand in the flow of forgiveness that begins with God in Christ and flows to us. Having received that forgiveness and standing in the flow of that forgiveness, we are able to give one another what is tantamount to the same forgiveness. However, forgiveness that does not flow out from God through Christ to us and then to others is forgiveness which has been despised. Forgiveness that is despised is forgiveness that will be withdrawn.

While receiving forgiveness is easy to do, obviously, extending that forgiveness to others is quite difficult, if not impossible, to do. So, how can we possibly do this? First, we are able to do this because we are not doing in order to receive God's forgiveness, but because we have already received God's forgiveness in Christ Jesus. We are not trying to get something which we do not have, but we are sharing that which we already have fully and freely. God has taken the initiative to cancel our debt in Christ Jesus so that we, too may cancel others debts toward us.

Secondly, we are able to do this only when we realize what forgiveness is. Some people will say, "I can forgive, but I can never forget." We have the idea that forgiveness is something we feel. The truth of the matter is that forgiveness is an act of the will. The Greek word for forgive means "to release". God forgave us by an act of His will through Jesus Christ, not because He "felt" like forgiving us. By the power of the Holy Spirit working through the Gospel, we will be able to forgive a person as an act of the will, letting go that person sin, whether we "feel" it or not.

Third, we take heart in the fact that there is a difference between the complete forgiveness God can and does bestow in Jesus and the forgiveness which we frail human beings often give. We shouldn't be surprised to find out that we may need to forgive others or need to listen to the forgiveness given by others more than once for the same sin when a sin causes deep wounds that take years to heal or leave scars that remain to the end of life.

So, what will it be? Our way or God's way? Our way is to take sin lightly and, therefore, take being forgiven and forgiving lightly. God's way is to take sin very seriously and, therefore, take forgiveness very seriously. Our way often leads to

ignorance of sin and lack of forgiveness. God's way leads to unconditional and unlimited forgiveness for any and all debts we may have, no matter how great they are, and to the sharing of that forgiveness with anyone who sins against us. Although God's way is both the easiest way when it comes to receiving forgiveness and the hardest way when it comes to giving forgiveness, it is the way that leads to our reconciliation with God, our reconciliation with each other, and joy which we experience now in part for now and will experience in full forever in heaven. Let's go THAT way! Amen