Matthew 18:21-35 9/13/2020

Maricopa Lutheran

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21Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” 22Jesus 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. 24When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; 25and, 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. 26So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ 27And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. 28But 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.’ 29Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ 30But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. 31When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. 32Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ 34And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. 35So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

The Gospel of the Lord

Praise to you O Christ.

Let’s pray: Speak, Lord, your people are listening. Amen.

The Old Testament Lesson, the Psalm and the Gospel for today all have a theme of forgiveness. The Gospel reading starts with Peter asking Jesus, “If a member of the church sins against me, how many times should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus responds, “Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times.” Peter’s questions is put so that it applies only to those in the Christian community. I think it would be wise for us to hear these words to be about forgiveness given to anyone and everyone who does us harm. We acknowledge that every time we pray in the Lord’s prayer, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” After the discussion about “how many times” Jesus illustrates the depth and breadth of such forgiveness by relating a parable.

A king who while settling accounts with his servants, finds one servant who somehow has run up enormous debt– so enormous as to be unbelievable. Ten thousand talents was a sum that was more than ten times the annual income of King Herod. It was **impossibly large**, really, and that is exactly the point that Jesus made for his listeners. Adding to the exaggerated language in this parable is that of the servant when he says, “Have patience with me and I will pay you **everything**.” It would have taken the servant thousands of years to repay it. The debt he owed his master was incalculable and it was impossible for him to repay it. The enormity of the debt is matched by the enormity of the forgiveness of the debt – again large beyond imagination.

That impossible to imagine forgiveness is extended to us. From our position at the foot of the cross, the forgiveness God extends to us is **extravagant,** covering all of our sinfulness against God and man - **no matter how great**. That, indeed is the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In the Lutheran Church we call that grace – undeserved mercy and forgiveness extended to us through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

As we return to the parable we read that the first servant encountered a fellow servant who owed him a small debt. One would think that having just been forgiven an enormous debt that he would easily have forgiven the small debt, but he didn’t. Somewhere he went very wrong, and it ended up costing him dearly. Somehow, the extravagant forgiveness that was extended to him was not fully received. He didn’t live as one forgiven. He took the road to resentment and retaliation rather than gratitude and grace, and there were consequences.

Forgiveness is the task of the victim – the one sinned against. Easy enough to say, but truly it **can** be a real struggle to forgive others who have inflicted pain, hurt and sometimes great harm on us. In today’s society, those harmed by another often seem to resort to the wish for revenge.

Matthew 18, however, compels us to take our cues from Christ, not from culture. Revenge chains victims and offenders to the wrongdoing, with both parties hopelessly stuck in a cycle of pain where each takes turns hurting the other.

The thing is – difficult as it may be – forgiving those who sin against is as much or more of a gift to the one sinned against as to the one who sinned. Not forgiving is life limiting; forgiving is life giving.

As an illustration of the cost of being chained to wrongdoing, consider the story of Louis. Louis was born to Italian immigrants in New York, and subsequently his non-English speaking family moved to Torrance, California. Louis became a rough, tough kid who was often bullied because of his inability to speak good English and he was well on his way to juvenile delinquency when his older brother suggested Louis take up running which he did – competing in high school and college – eventually competing in the 1936 Olympic games in Berlin. When the United States entered World War II, Louis joined the Army Air Corp as a bombardier and survived several harrowing missions in the South Pacific. But in May of 1943 when he was part of a crew ordered to take a B24 airplane to search for the pilot of a downed plane, his life took a disastrous turn. The plane suffered mechanical failure and went down. Louis and two other airmen of a crew of 11 survived the crash and spent 47 days afloat in the middle of the ocean. One of the crewmen died during that time, but in yet another miracle Louis and the other man in the raft found land after traveling 2000 miles. They landed on a Japanese controlled island and very much expected to be executed there. Instead were sent on to Japanese POW camps.

Back home in the U.S. Louis was presumed dead by the government and indeed he should have been because over the next two years, Louis suffered illness, torture, starvation, and routine beatings by the guards. One of those guards nicknamed

“The Bird” knew Louis was a former Olympian and made him a special target of his vicious torture.

By now I’m sure most of you know I’m talking about Louis Zamperini whose life was chronicled in both a book and a move entitled “Unbroken.” After his release from captivity in August of 1945 Louis returned home to a family who had never given up on him, resumed life in the States and married. The thing is, Louis **was** broken. His brokenness revealed itself when Louis was tortured nightly by dreams that he was strangling the Bird, one night awakening horrified to find himself strangling his pregnant wife. During his waking hours, Louis was obsessed with thoughts of returning to Japan, hunting down the Bird and killing him. To dull the pain of his memories of torture and wish for revenge, Louis began to drink heavily, eventually, spiraling down into alcoholism.

Not surprisingly, that caused havoc in his life and nearly ended his marriage. Looking for some way to help him, Louis’ wife suggested he attend a Billy Graham Crusade in Los Angeles. He did and everything began to change for Louis. John Meroney in his interviews with Louis in 2010 and 2011, asked what it was he heard from Billy Graham that changed things.

Louis responded, “One thing that shook me up was he said “When people come to the end of their rope and there’s nowhere to turn, they turn to God. I thought – ‘That’s what I did on the raft. All I did was pray to God., every day. In prison camp my main prayer was, ‘Get me home alive, God and I’ll seek you and serve you. “I came home and forgot about the hundreds of promises I’d made to God.”

“Well, that night I went back to Billy Graham’s prayer room and made my profession of faith in Christ. I asked God to forgive me for not being conscious that He answered my prayer requests. While I was still on my knees, I knew there was a change. It happened within seconds. I felt this perfect calm, a peace. I knew then that I was through getting drunk. I also knew I’d forgiven all my prison guards, including the Bird. “

Forgiving is life-giving. His faith in God and acts of forgiveness enabled Louis to live the life God intended for him – he went on to found a camp for troubled youth.

Forgiveness can be relatively easy when the offender is truly contrite for an offense – intended or unintended. It is difficult and seemingly impossible to forgive when the offender repeatedly and intentionally inflicts harm like Louis suffered and certainly forgiveness in that circumstance, **does not** mean the hurtful actions are condoned or should be tolerated in the future. Forgiving grievous harm is impossible to do on our own – but we aren’t expected to do it alone. We are all beloved children of God who forgives all of our sins, and by that grace, with God’s help we are given the power to forgive those who harm us.

So, a question for each of you - Is there someone in your life who has hurt you that you have yet to forgive? Do it now. Let each of us ask for the grace to let go of those grudges and hurts we hold on to. How else will we ever be free? Forgiving breaks the chains that tie us to old hurts, harmful words and acts and frees us to live as forgiven people. **Forgiving is life-giving**.

Amen.