

15th Sunday After Pentecost

September 13, 2020

Sermon by Rev. Zachary W. Johnson

Hill Avenue Grace Lutheran Church
Pasadena, California

Gospel: 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.”

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SERMON by Pastor Zach Johnson

One of the most challenging things for us to do as Christians is to grant forgiveness to those who have done us harm or wronged us in some way. Often, when someone hurts us, it hardens our heart. The pain can cause us to lose trust and confidence. We wonder whether or not the hurt will ever go away; we wonder if the person will eventually hurt us again. Sometimes the pain leads to anger and instead of forgiveness we want revenge; we want to see the other person suffer.



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I can imagine that when Jesus answered Peter's question with "not seven times but seventy-seven times," Peter must have been taken aback. Peter must have thought that Jesus was crazy, for why would any of us want to forgive someone who keeps wronging us in some way? How could any of us find the courage to keep forgiving someone who keeps wronging us? And, what about when the relationship becomes abusive or violent, surely Jesus doesn't want us to keep forgiving the person who continually causes us physical or emotional harm?

Well, it is my belief that Jesus would never want us to continue in a relationship that is abusive or violent, but there is a difference between forgiving someone and enabling their destructive behaviors. Forgiveness doesn't always mean the continuation of a relationship. Sometimes forgiveness can only happen (between us humans) after separation has occurred.

Rather, what Jesus is getting at with Peter and the disciples is the understanding of having a forgiving heart because of God's forgiving heart. In other words, as we pray in the Lord's Prayer: "forgive us our sins as we forgive the sins of others," it means that we recognize the forgiveness we have received through the death and resurrection of Christ, that no matter how much we may fall short at times when we are repentant God grants us forgiveness, which transforms our hearts to be forgiving of others. God's forgiveness empowers us to be forgiving.

Of course, the influence of sin tries to convince us otherwise and often creeps into our hearts trying to get us to believe we shouldn't be forgiving at all. Sin likes to use the pain and hurt we feel and twist it into hardening our hearts so that we become unwilling to forgive. And it is hard, because sometimes the pain and hurt can run deep.

For the last 10 years of her life, my mother turned to alcohol to soothe her from the emotional pain she never dealt with in a healthy way. Of course, she became a severe alcoholic and the alcohol controlled her life. The alcohol caused my mother and me to have a very strained and difficult relationship. I refused to enable her destructive behaviors, which at times caused my mother to become very verbally abusive to me. I remember, the very last words I ever heard from her before she died in January of 2018 was a text message she said: "I hope you choke on communion tomorrow." She, of course was drunk when she texted that to me, but boy did it hurt.

She and I never got the chance to reconcile before she died. Part of that was because I needed to separate myself from my mother because of the emotional abuse and the fact that I refused to enable her alcoholism.



Since my mother's death, I have struggled to forgive my mother for the rocky final 10 years of her life. I have struggled with forgiving my mother for the abusive things she said to me, and for the fact that it felt like she didn't love me enough to want to get sober. I have struggled with accepting the fact that alcoholism is a disease, because I've wanted to blame my mother for her actions, even though I know she was being controlled by the alcohol. There are times where I think I've forgiven my mother, and then there are times where I still feel anger in my heart and begin to question whether I've truly come to a place of forgiveness.

I tell you this because I want you to understand that I do not have some lofty idea about forgiveness. I know how hard it can be to forgive someone who has hurt us deeply. But I also want to convey the fact that I keep trying. I continue to pray that God give me a forgiving heart and help me to finally let go of my anger towards my mother. It may take years, but I trust that God will continue to shape and mold my heart with grace and mercy so that one day I will feel like I've truly forgiven my mother.

Now, forgiveness does not mean that we condone the actions of the person who hurt us, nor does it mean we just forget what they've done to us. Forgiveness is our willingness to release them from guilt and vengeance. Forgiveness is giving ourselves permission to let go of the anger we feel. Forgiveness is as much freeing for us as it is for the person we are forgiving.

But forgiveness is a hard thing for us, and it can take a long time for us to be in a place where we are ready to forgive. What we must be weary of is to not allow our anger and hurt to consume us to the point where it creates an unhealable bitterness and hardness in our hearts. Thankfully, we have a loving and forgiving God who will continually find ways to show us grace and mercy, so that our hearts are grounded more in love than anger.

One of the reasons we come together each week in worship is to experience this wonderful grace and mercy of God, which helps to transform our hearts to be more forgiving and loving. This is why we often begin our worship with the order of confession and forgiveness. It gives us an opportunity to lay down our burdens onto Jesus and hear the amazing words from him that we are forgiven and still loved in spite of the ways we screwed up over the past week. But, in addition, we also hear the good news of God's love proclaimed in the scripture readings and the sermon, which reminds us that Christ died for us so that we are redeemed from sin and death. And then there is Holy Communion. In the words of institution we hear Jesus remind us that, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sin..." Partaking in Holy Communion is another act of receiving God's forgiveness, as we literally ingest the Lord of salvation, who then becomes fully present in us, transforming our hearts into his love. All of these things are the means of grace that God uses to remind us that we have been forgiven, which frees us to be more forgiving of others.



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Of course, this is also why God washes us clean of our sin in baptism. The gift of baptism is a daily gift that continues to wash away our sin and remind us that we have been clothed in the new life of God's love. Because of our baptism, we no longer have to give into the powers of sin and death, for we have been given the power of the Holy Spirit, which helps us live a life that is filled with God's love, mercy, and forgiveness.

Along with these things, God also reminds us of our freedom from sin and death whenever we are granted forgiveness by someone we have wronged. Hearing the words "I forgive you" is powerful and healing. Knowing we have been released from the burden of our sin is an amazing feeling. God uses the forgiveness of others to remind us that we are loved and that we are free to forgive.

Yes, while the act of forgiving someone who hurt us can be challenging at times for us, we are free to continually call upon God to help transform our hearts to be more forgiving so that we don't have to continually allow the pain and anger to control our lives. Whether it is through worship or prayer, God will transform our hearts so that forgiving seventy-seven times does not seem so daunting of a task. And, by being more forgiving, we will show this world the amazing gift of God's love.

Amen.



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