

Pentecost 18 (Proper 19 A), September 14, 2008
Church of the Reformation—Lutheran, Affton, MO
Text: Matthew 18:21-35

The New Math of Forgiveness

Just when bankruptcy and indebtedness become the focus of news headlines and political campaigns, they also play an integral part in today's Gospel reading. We have been following Jesus for the last weeks through the writing of Matthew, learning what it means to live in forgiveness: when a brother or sister is wronged, instead of seeking revenge, goes to the offender and works out the issue in private so the community will not be torn apart by bitterness and revenge.

That lesson had barely been taught when the first hand up was that of Peter: **“Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?”** Peter may have been looking for limits or loopholes; in reality, he was just trying to be practical; he was just trying to answer the question we've all had on our minds at some time: When is enough *enough*? The rabbis had said three times was enough. In this light, Peter's offer was at least a bit more generous: seven times, the biblical number of completeness and holiness, God's favorite number.

If seven is the magic number, imagine how long you would be married if your spouse agreed to forgive you seven times but no more than that.; imagine how long you and I would be members of this congregation if seven were the quota on forgiveness. If forgiveness had a limit, this place would be pretty empty today.

Forgiveness that has limits is no forgiveness at all. Forgiveness has no limits, no calculators, no record books, no stored-up memory. Forgiveness is lavish, prodigal, outrageous, crazy. **“I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven,”** Jesus says, implying that just about the time you lose count, you are on the way to learning what it means to live under the Gospel and not the Law.

Forgiveness is letting go of the offending thing or offender. It is dropping dead to what someone has done to you. Forgiveness is not a bargaining chip: “I’ll forgive you if you promise never to do that again.” There are no ifs or conditions in forgiveness. Forgiveness is living without the sin or offense having power over you—how can it, when it has been wiped out? The old math is always looking for a way to even things out, to make certain everyone gets what he deserves, what she earns. The new math for the Christian is forgiveness, the freedom from sin, the freedom that is ours as blood-bought, baptized children of the heavenly Father.

When Jesus preached His sermon on the mount, He taught: **“Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors”** (Matt. 6:12), and today He explains it to us with a parable. A servant owed his king a lot of money—10,000 talents, more than a lifetime salary. Here the key words in this story: **“he could not pay.”** The servant begs for mercy and tries to cut a deal: **“Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.”** The servant was bargaining beyond his means.

There was no way he could ever pay off the debt. His promise would never pay the bill; nor do ours. Like that servant, we too are in debt over our heads and hearts. The Law of God exposes that debt. Like that servant, we can not pay. Like him, we attempt to bargain with God. Like the servant, our promises can not pay the bill—not even on an easy-payment plan.

Despite the various options of retribution available to him, the king does a crazy, outrageous, insanely Gospel thing—he forgives the servant the entire debt. The king drops dead to all the bookkeeping involved, and the servant walks away free and clear of all debt. It really has nothing to do with what the servant said or thought he could do; it is all in the king's grace and mercy that he forgives the servant.

The freed and cleared servant soon meets with a fellow servant who owes him a few bucks. The newly forgiven servant wraps his fingers around the neck of his debtor and demands payment in full. With familiar words the debtor begs: **“Have patience with me, and I will pay you.”**

Instead of forgiveness the first servant gives his debtor imprisonment. When the king hears of this, he calls the servant and reminds him of what his short-term memory has forgotten: **“Should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?”** The angry king hands the man over to the jailers until he can pay the entire debt. How sad the ending—he had been free until he started choking his debtors.

How does this all come home to us here in St. Louis? When we refuse to forgive as we have been forgiven, we are putting ourselves in prison, placing ourselves into solitary confinement, isolated, cut off, alone. When we refuse to forgive as we have been forgiven, we are not acting like the free children of God that we are in Christ, but like children of Adam, vindicating

ourselves, justifying our sin, getting even, doing to others as they have done to us. That is not the way of Christ. It is not the life Jesus hung on the cross to win for you.

Christ is the Lamb of God who took away the sin of the whole world. His death covered all sin, yours and mine included. Because of Christ's death and resurrection, we can look at those who "owe us one" and we can see that person as one for whom Jesus died. She is someone who is reconciled to God in the death of Jesus. He has been forgiven. Do they know that from you by your words and your forgiveness?

How can you not forgive when your sins were poured into the black hole of Jesus' death? How can you not forgive when you have been reborn and renewed in Baptism, when you have eaten the Body of Christ given into death for you, when you have drunk the Blood of Jesus shed for you, when you have heard Jesus say, "I forgive you all your sins"? Can the forgiven refuse to forgive?

This morning you leave this service debt free; your sins are as far from you as the east is from the west. Because of Jesus and His death on the cross and His resurrection, the books on your sin have been closed; your debt has been paid **"not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and His innocent suffering and death."** You are forgiven and free.

As disciples of Jesus we learn to live as free children: confessing our sins, taking responsibility for our words and actions, hearing that God does not count our sins against us for Jesus' sake.

And we learn to forgive others in the same reckless and outrageous way of God—not in order to be forgiven, but because we are already forgiven.

To forgive someone who has sinned against you is to be a picture, an icon, of Jesus for your neighbor, your spouse, your family member, your friend, just as Joseph was a Christ-figure for his brothers. They had wanted to kill him, but instead sold him to slave traders who dumped him off in Egypt. Joseph had every reason to get even with his brothers. Instead, through tears of reconciliation, Joseph says, **“You meant it for evil, but God intended it for good.”**

Perhaps that is something we don't always think about. Even when others sin against us, intending harm for us, God has already worked for good in the all-reconciling death of Jesus on the cross. What's the point in getting even when God has reconciled the books? God has worked everything for good. We can do what Jesus did—drop dead, let go, and forgive. When we speak the word of forgiveness to others, it is not our forgiveness we speak; it belongs to Jesus. He is the Source—His cross and open tomb, His wounded hands and side, the water and blood that flow to font and chalice, hands on head, words spoken into ears, “I forgive you all of your sins”—all that is from Jesus to you. No need for calculators, record books, or even new math. All we need is God's math—forgiveness in Christ Jesus.

Henry V. Gerike