

11/08/20

22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Trinity

**Forgive as you have been forgiven**

**Matthew 18: 21-35**

Then Peter came to Him and said, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?”

Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.

Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants.

And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents.

But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment be made.

The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, ‘Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all.’

Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt.

But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and he laid hands on him and took him by the throat, saying, ‘Pay me what you owe!’

So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you all.’

And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt.

So when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and came and told their master all that had been done.

Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me.

Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?’

And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him.

So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you from his heart does not forgive his brother his trespasses.”

Grace be unto you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Every time we pray that model of Christian prayer which our Savior taught us, we ask that our heavenly Father would “forgive us our trespasses,

as we forgive those who trespass against us.” In teaching us that petition, Jesus Himself emphasized that if we will not forgive others, then we ourselves will not receive God’s pardon. If we will not forgive those who have wronged us, that is a sure sign, Jesus wants us to know, that we think we can be judged on the basis of the Law and that we have somehow merited our Lord’s forgiveness while the one who has sinned against us has not. To forgive others as we have been forgiven—that is simply an automatic and necessary corollary of the Gospel-truth that we are saved by God’s free grace alone, without any merit or worthiness on our part, alone for the sake of Christ Jesus who died for us and rose for us.

The instruction which Jesus gives in our text comes in response to this question from His disciple Peter, “Lord, how often shall I forgive (my brother)? Up to seven times?” In his life before following Jesus, Peter had been a fisherman and a merchant who sold his catch to make a living. He was used to counting the fish he sold and weighing them to assess their worth. This much money for this much fish—in Peter’s experience, everything could be measured in that way. Everything had its value and its limit, and Peter reasoned that forgiveness, too, was that kind of commodity.

Jesus, however, opens up a whole new world to His disciples and to us—a world in which there is no limit at all to the grace and forgiveness which is offered to us and in which there must therefore be no limit to the free forgiveness we offer to others. “I do not say to you, up to seven times,” our Savior answers, “but up to seventy times seven.” In other words, Jesus makes it clear, we are always to forgive as we are forgiven—freely, without condition—and there can be no limit on the pardon that we extend to others. Our Gospel-text for this twenty-second Sunday after Trinity affords us an opportunity to meditate on this aspect of our Christian life.

## I

“Lord,” Peter asks, “how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” Seven—that was for God’s people the number of completeness, and Peter undoubtedly thought that he was being generous and big-hearted in suggesting that we should forgive someone that often. Seven times to turn the other cheek to the one who strikes me; seven times to accept an insult without responding with harsh and angry words; seven times to pardon the one who has wronged me, hurt me, taken from me—to our natural way of thinking, Peter has indeed been generous in his thinking, and he has set the standard high.

But our Lord answers, “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven”—in other words, always. And He tells the parable in our text to illustrate His point. In Jesus’ story, the master forgives his

servant a debt of ten thousand talents, an astronomical sum which no one could ever hope to repay and for which the man's life and the lives of his family were legally forfeited. At the man's pleading, however, the king has mercy and cancels that huge debt—the man and his family are saved from slavery and he is given a new life. Yet that same man then refuses to forgive the debt of only a few dollars owed to him by his fellow-servant. Instead, he presses the letter of the law and has his colleague thrown into prison.

It is worth noting that we immediately recognize the utter shamefulness of this man's actions. Having himself received forgiveness, he refuses to extend that kind of forgiveness to his fellow-servant. Having himself been shown limitless and life-saving mercy, he shows none to his debtor. His own debt of literally millions of dollars has been cancelled, yet he will not cancel the debt of a few dollars owed to him. That, Jesus wants us to know, is what it looks like to our Father in heaven when you and I will not forgive those who have wronged us.

## II

In Jesus' story, the King and Master forgives his servant a staggering debt which he could never hope to repay. The pardon which the servant receives is not partial—there are no conditions attached, there is no remainder for which he is still responsible, there is no time-payment plan which he must follow. His master wipes his slate clean.

That, we are meant to see, is what our Lord has done for us. To understand and to accept our Savior's admonition to us that we are to forgive others without limit, it is necessary for us to ponder what we have received from Him. "Conceived and born in sin...have sinned against (our Lord) in thought, word, and deed"—with those words we confess our sins and our sinfulness every Sunday. We describe with those words the debt we owe before the throne of our Maker, the ten thousand talents that He in His holiness had a right to call due. But He did not. Instead, He sent His Son to pay our debt for us.

If we want to understand better what we owe—the debt that has been wiped away by His grace—then we must climb the hill Golgotha and take our seats there beneath the center cross, and we must contemplate what our Savior endured for us. The bruises on His face from the fists of the soldiers, the deep gashes on His back from the Roman scourge, the holes in His hands and feet from the nails which fasten Him to the tree of execution—these mark a part of our debt of ten thousand talents. His anguished cry to His Father whose wrath against sin He feels there on the cross—also that torment of hell itself is a mark of our debt. The blood that He sheds there on that hill, the life that He offers up—they mark the enormity of what we owe

to our King.

Thank God that they also measure the enormity—the utter limitlessness—of His forgiveness. He endured all that to cleanse our slate, to eliminate our debt, to win full and free pardon for us. And now He says to you and to me, “Forgive as I have forgiven you.”

### III

Thus there remains now for us this most difficult task of our Christian walk—this duty to forgive without limit, this duty which we want to perform for His sake but which, we know, goes so far beyond our strength and our abilities. And so we must ponder also how we can go about striving to carry out our Savior’s will.

We remember, first, that forgiving those who sin against us has nothing to do with our feelings or our emotions. It is a duty comprised of that active love for others—that doing what is best for others—which our Savior has described for us. It is to do what is best for those who have wronged us; it is to bless those who curse us; it is to pray for those who abuse us. That is what the forgiveness looks like which our Lord requires of us.

Nor do we look to our feelings for our motivation in this life-long endeavor to forgive—this never-ending task of extending to others the pardon which we have received. Instead, we again go to Calvary’s hill and contemplate there what our Savior does for us, the enormous cost that He so willingly pays on our behalf, the depth of the love which moves Him. We hear there the prayer that He raises—that His Father in heaven would forgive the very ones who nail Him to the tree of death—and we accept in faith that His prayer also includes us. It is that saving love of our Savior to which we turn for the strength to forgive as He forgives. It is for the sake of our incarnate Lord that we push aside our feelings and pray as He has taught us, “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

Peter asks Jesus if we should forgive those who wrong us even seven times, and our Savior answers, “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.” Finally, there is no better way that we show to others the kind of Lord and Savior we serve, and we pray for His help to walk in His footsteps also in the way that we offer His forgiveness to others.

May the Holy Spirit grant us for Jesus’ sake the faith and love to forgive as we have been forgiven. Amen.