

**Pentecost 15**  
**September 13, 2020**

Genesis 50:15-21

<sup>15</sup> When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him." <sup>16</sup> So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this command before he died: <sup>17</sup> 'Say to Joseph, "Please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you.'" And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. <sup>18</sup> His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, "Behold, we are your servants." <sup>19</sup> But Joseph said to them, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? <sup>20</sup> As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. <sup>21</sup> So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones." Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.

Psalm 103:[1-7] 8-13

<sup>1</sup> Bless the LORD, | O my soul,\*  
and all that is within me, bless his | holy name.  
<sup>2</sup> Bless the LORD, | O my soul,\*  
and forget not | all his benefits.  
<sup>3</sup> He forgives | all your sins\*  
and heals all | your infirmities;  
<sup>4</sup> he redeems your life | from the grave\*  
and crowns you with mercy and | lovingkindness;  
<sup>5</sup> he satisfies you | with good things,\*  
and your youth is renewed | like an eagle's.  
<sup>6</sup> The LORD ex- | cutes righteousness\*  
and judgment for all who | are oppressed.  
<sup>7</sup> He made his ways | known to Moses\*  
and his works to the chil- | dren of Israel.  
<sup>8</sup> The LORD is full of compas- | sion and mercy,\*  
slow to anger and | of great kindness.  
<sup>9</sup> He will not al- | ways accuse us,\*  
nor will he keep his an- | ger forever.  
<sup>10</sup> He has not dealt with us according | to our sins,\*  
nor rewarded us according | to our wickedness.  
<sup>11</sup> For as the heavens are high | above the earth,\*  
so is his mercy great upon | those who fear him.

<sup>12</sup> As far as the east is | from the west,\*  
so far has he removed our | sins from us.

<sup>13</sup> As a father cares | for his children,\*  
so does the LORD care for | those who fear him.

#### Romans 14:1-12

**14** As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. <sup>2</sup>One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. <sup>3</sup>Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. <sup>4</sup>Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master<sup>[a]</sup> that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

<sup>5</sup>One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. <sup>6</sup>The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God. <sup>7</sup>For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. <sup>8</sup>For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. <sup>9</sup>For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living.

<sup>10</sup>Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; <sup>11</sup>for it is written,

“As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me,  
and every tongue shall confess<sup>[b]</sup> to God.”

<sup>12</sup>So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.

#### Matthew 18:21-35

<sup>21</sup>Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” <sup>22</sup>Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.

<sup>23</sup>“Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants.<sup>[g]</sup> <sup>24</sup>When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents.<sup>[h]</sup> <sup>25</sup>And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. <sup>26</sup>So the servant<sup>[i]</sup> fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ <sup>27</sup>And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. <sup>28</sup>But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii,<sup>[j]</sup> and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay what you owe.’ <sup>29</sup>So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ <sup>30</sup>He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. <sup>31</sup>When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. <sup>32</sup>Then his master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. <sup>33</sup>And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ <sup>34</sup>And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers,<sup>[k]</sup> until he should pay all his debt. <sup>35</sup>So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”

## Message: The Hard Work of Forgiveness

In the gospel lesson this morning, Peter comes to Jesus seeking clarity on what seems a simple question: "How many times should a person forgive a brother or sister?"

By this time in Matthew's telling of the story, Peter seems to be catching on a bit about Jesus. He's learning that Jesus doesn't think or act like other people, so maybe he wants to show the master that he is learning. If Peter would have approached the issue in a more common way, he would have asked, "Shall I forgive as many as two or three times?" This would have been the Pharisaic or rabbinic approach – or yours and mine! Forgive, yes, but prudently. To forgive once is generous. To be let down by the same person and forgive a second time would be exemplary. To be fool enough to get hurt by the same individual a third time and to forgive even then: this is certainly bordering on the ridiculous...or the divine!

But Peter's learning that Jesus thinks big. So he makes a bold move and asks: "Should I forgive as many as seven times?" This would be absurd by rabbinic standards, but it might just be the kind of number Jesus would approve. It's a holy number, and it has the kind of exaggerated quality that Jesus seems to like. "Surely", we imagine Peter thinking, "Jesus will like this idea." Surely this shows strength of leadership, holy insight, generosity of spirit. Surely, this is an impressive demonstration of all that Peter has learned!

Or not! Should we be surprised that Jesus is less than impressed with this display of self-righteousness? "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven." (That's not 77, but 70...seven times!) Nice try, Peter. You may think you're moving in the right direction, but you just have a long way to go! You want a number? How about 490. There's the number required, if you have to have a number, but it is an impossible number! Completely unthinkable. Jesus uses an absurd exaggeration. So what's he getting at?

What it means is this: No matter what number we come up with or imagine, or what the "magic" number is, how will we know if we've reached it? By counting! But Jesus is saying that if we're counting in the first place, then we've missed the point. If we're counting, then it is no longer really about forgiveness at all; it's about keeping score! We may *seem* to be merciful, but counting, keeping track, simply means that we are just waiting for our neighbor to cross some line—generously drawn, perhaps—but a line nonetheless. And beyond that line, that number, whatever it is, we are no longer obligated or willing to forgive. That's not from the heart at all, is it?

Then, to reinforce the lesson, Jesus tells this parable. A servant owed his master some money – a lot of money – OK, a cosmically stupid amount of money! How much was it actually? Our translation says 10,000 talents, some say 10,000 *bags of gold*; OK, fine, but what's a talent, or how big are the bags? The actual Greek wording is 10,000 talents. Now, one talent is the equivalent of 20 years' worth of wages; so do the math! 10,000 talents...that's 200,000 years' worth of wages! (\$3 billion at today's minimum wage level.)

How the servant got himself into such a situation is not the point – it's a story! What we do need to hear is the ridiculous plea on the part of the servant – *Be patient with me and I'll pay back everything.*” Who's this guy kidding? How's he going to pay back 200,000 years of wages? Get a raise? Win the lottery?

Suppose the master had granted the servant's request – and suppose somehow he actually managed to repay the debt. What would the servant remember for the rest of his life: the master's extension of the pay-back period or his own hard work? That's what we always want – we want to demonstrate our own ability to fix things ourselves.

But the master knows this; he wants us to know just how merciful he is. So, he doesn't grant the man his request; he doesn't just extend the repayment period – he cancels the debt! He forgives what is owed!

I've heard people try to invoke this story by telling someone whom they've offended that they *have* to forgive them – that the Bible demands it! But forgiveness is to be begged for, not demanded! Being forgiven – receiving what we do not deserve, what we're not entitled to, what we have no right to even ask for much less claim or expect – is what makes it forgiveness!

And sometimes the act forgiveness isn't so much for the offender as it is the offended. Jesus concludes his story with the warning, “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

There's a certain irony or paradox here: We believe and proclaim that *if we confess our sins*, God is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Is that forgiveness now being withheld or tied to some external work of righteousness – our confessing – like the servant somehow paying back the debt after all?

I don't think so. I think it has to do with awareness and experiencing the benefits of grace. Even a caged animal will remain captive if it is unaware

that the door is open. The most sumptuous feast still requires eating. The most nutritious foods bring no nourishment if we do not eat them. The benefits are not lacking or being withheld – they just do us no good if left unconsumed.

Maybe forgiveness is like that. It isn't being withheld, or now dependent upon being earned through works. The forgiveness won for us on the cross and extended tangibly again and again at the Table still needs to become real to us, be recognized, taken in, experienced to the core of our being. We need to know that it is, as Luther said, "for you"! Otherwise, like the caged animal unaware of the open door, or the unmerciful servant in the parable, we'll remain unaware of the forgiveness granted us.

How could the servant have not realized what had been given him? How could he be so blind? Because realization, awareness, sight would only come in the wake of forgiveness given away to the neighbor. He did not understand what had been truly given to him, what was his, the gift he possessed because he refused to give it away to another like himself.

And in that blindness it became no different than if the forgiveness had never been given at all, for all the good it did him! He was still in the bondage of debt!

Do you want to experience the freedom and joy of forgiveness? Then forgive others as you have been forgiven. It's not that you won't be forgiven if you don't, but if you can't know it in your heart and feel it in your soul, experience it flooding through your heart, what's the difference?

And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.

Thanks be to God!

**Prayers of the Church,  
15th Sunday after Pentecost, September 13, 2020**

Let us approach the throne of grace on behalf of the Church, the world, and one another.

*A brief silence is kept.*

We are your debtors in so many ways, heavenly Father! We sometimes forget how even our trifling sins can, if unrepented and unforgiven, run up a soul-crushing "tab." Thank you for being so willing to cancel our debt. Keep us ever mindful of the costly generosity of your beloved Son. Give us his grace and strength, to willingly forgive the debts of those who have wronged us.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Teach your Church how to be a school for forgiveness and an outpost of your "Mercy Hospital." Give it leaders who explain and practice forgiving. Make its worship an encounter with your forgiveness. Equip its members to pray for and share the forgiveness you give through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

How difficult it must be for your people to forgive when they are being tortured simply for believing in Jesus, who prayed for his enemies even from the Cross! Give them a double portion of his Spirit, so that they may bless and not curse; forgive and not revile. Let persecutors repent from their evil and ask forgiveness from those they have wronged.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Make the people of this congregation rich in mercy, abounding in kindness, tireless in good works, and joyful in praising you, the source of all mercy.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Bless our schools, colleges, seminaries, and home schools as they embark on a strange and difficult journey this fall. We don't know how COVID will affect students, teachers, and families. We do know that children need to be in school, but we want them to be safe. Guide and protect us all, and help us to make prudent decisions, even though sometimes we will make mistakes. We pray for all who are crushed beneath a load of debt. They can do foolish or dangerous things to seek relief. Help them to ask for help, forgiveness, and a wise solution. Help those to whom they are indebted to move beyond anger and self-interest, into the uncharted yet blessed waters of mercy. Remind them how indebted they are to you, for you forgive their debts of sin.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Be merciful to this poor broken world. Help our leaders to rule with justice tempered with mercy and compassion. Bestow on all of us a spirit of patience, forbearance, humility, and kindness. Teach us to outdo one another in showing mercy and righteousness.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We pray for everyone seeking to be Jesus' disciples, especially as he teaches them the hard path of forgiveness and self-sacrifice. Fill them with your Spirit. Help them to rightly and wisely share your Son's costly grace, even with people who are obnoxious, obstinate, or oblivious.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Renew the life and health of all who are afflicted in any way by the powers of sin, evil, sickness, or death. Especially we plead on behalf of Dallas & Mary Rathe, Marilyn Fredrick, Xavier Roach, Kelly Staley, Norma Schlee, Pastor David Steffenson, Pastor James Puotyual, and Pastor Mel Harris. Heal all their infirmities, dear Lord; and crown them with your mercy and loving-kindness.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Most holy Father, you show goodness and mercy toward those who die trusting in you. We remember this morning Rev. Dr. Cathi Braasch; thank you for redeeming her life from the grave. Make your ways known also to us; renew our strength; and take away our sin. Lead us in the pathways of your loving-kindness, and teach us to forgive rather than to pass judgment upon one another. Grant that whether we live or die, we know that we are yours. Raise us to that perfect and glorious life which you bestow upon all whom you have redeemed.

Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**