

**Sept. 13, 2020 – 15<sup>th</sup> Sun. after Pentecost**

Genesis 50: 15-21; Psalm 103: 1-13; Romans 14: 1-12; Matthew 18: 21-35

*May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer.*

Then 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?” Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. “For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; 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. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. 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.’ Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. 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. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

I was feeling stuck on how to begin this (6 week hiatus from sermon writing notwithstanding) until I recalled Jesus’ surprising, even shocking response to Peter’s question about forgiveness, and so begins today’s parable: “For this reason, the kingdom of heaven may be compared to...”

Jesus changes the focus of Peter’s question by placing the matter of forgiveness within the context of the kingdom of heaven. Forgiveness is not some abstract, pie-

in-the-sky concept; rather it is rooted in the gracious activity or reign of God. (Which may not make it any easier to accomplish, but perhaps lightens the burden for those of us who struggle with this matter.) Forgiveness lies within God's realm. You know, "to err is human, to forgive divine." While Alexander Pope, to whom this phrase is attributed, may have been speaking tongue in cheek in his essay on criticism, his words bear much truth.

Forgiveness is no trifling matter. It's hard, painful, sacrificial and oftentimes, impossible. When we've been hurt or wronged by another, our defence mechanisms kick in; we want to protect our vulnerability so anger, resentment and hatred rear their ugly heads. We try to regain our power and control by exacting revenge, inflicting pain, punishing our oppressor. Of course we are justified in these courses of action because we have been wronged, we have been wounded.

We're aware of the ill health effects of holding onto resentments and righteous anger and the psychological/physical benefits of forgiveness. But I'm not sure that's quite what the parable is portraying. I think maybe Paul is closer to it when he writes in his letter: "We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. 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." In other words, forgiveness isn't about us or even the offender, but ultimately about God and God's kingdom of grace, mercy and restoration to wholeness. The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a gift of extraordinary forgiveness, like forgiving one's own brothers for selling you into slavery. It wasn't ultimately about Joseph or his brothers, but the God in whom Joseph placed his trust, the God whose intention is always for good.

The New Testament is always calling us to do what we cannot do—to love our enemies, to bless those who persecute us, to pray without ceasing, to be perfect as God in heaven is perfect. The New Testament commands us to live these impossibilities because what is impossible with human beings is possible with God; because we are promised that, as we put one foot in front of the other to seek to live out these commands, what is commanded of us is given as a gift. No, we ourselves cannot forgive, but as we strive to forgive we are given God's forgiveness as a gift. We are not called to create forgiveness; that is beyond us. We are called instead to participate in a forgiveness given to us as a gift. All of our efforts to forgive those who have hurt and wronged us, efforts that are broken, partial, incomplete, and stained,

are gathered into the forgiveness that is full, whole, and pure—the forgiveness God gives in Jesus Christ. (Thomas Long, *To Err is Human; To Forgive...?*)

We think that forgiveness is something *we* do, or that we accomplish on our own. We try to make it about us, forgetting that we are *participants* in, not creators of a gift of immeasurable magnitude...77+ times more than we can ask or imagine. If forgiveness seems beyond our grasp, if even the desire to forgive is not within reach, we are nonetheless bound by God's unfailing grace. So wounded and wounder together are encompassed in a realm which is here in part, remaking what is broken. The gift is offered freely...to the friend who lied to you, to the spouse whom you betrayed, to the child who walked away, to the one who offended you. It's offered to us not only individually, but collectively as God's children, so that we may be a sign and a hope of the transformative power of God's forgiveness.