

Pentecost 16 – September 17, 2023
Text: Matthew 18:21-35
Theme: Forgiveness: It's not an Option

Good old Peter. He always asks the question everyone wanted to know but were afraid to ask. How much do I have to forgive someone? We all have that person in our lives who requires more than normal forgiveness and just when we have gotten past one offense, he offers another. Peter knew that guy as well and wants to know if he has to keep on forgiving the same guy over and over again or if he can just write him off at some point. Jesus, of course we know, gives him not a real number but a symbol for infinity. Seven is a number indicating a heavenly complete: the seven days of creation, the sabbath on the seventh day, seven great feasts. Ten is an earthly complete: 10 Commandments for living on earth, 10 plagues, God's asks for a tenth returned of all He gives us. So, Peter suggests 7 times, which really is quite a lot of forgiveness if we are talking about forgiving the same person for the same sin. Jesus multiplies 7 by 10 and then by 7 again. The answer is not 490. The answer is infinity. You can never refuse to forgive someone who seeks your forgiveness.

But why would we want to refuse to forgive someone? Why would that even be a question? Very simple. We are arrogant, works righteous, self-righteous, stiff-necked people. We have the same problem God's people have always had, the one of which Joshua complained, Elijah complained, Jeremiah complained and St. Paul

complained. We do not want to admit that we would go to Hell were it not for the mercy of God who freely gave us salvation. We would never say that out loud but we broadcast it when we are unforgiving, when we hold a grudge, when we remember and catalogue every wrong ever done to us. When we don't let go of hurt and forgive, we are the unmerciful servant.

Jesus made His point brilliantly. How dare you refuse to give forgiveness when you have been given everything from the Father who sent His Son to die for you in order to forgive you. There is no argument for withholding forgiveness. Except of course, by offering forgiveness, you have to admit that you too have been forgiven of much more than you are currently forgiving.

In the Old Testament we can find people who highlight the elements of the Messiah in one way or another. Moses was a type of Christ in his leading God's people out of slavery and into the Promised Land. Likewise, Christ leads us out of the slavery of sin towards our Promised Land which is Heaven. In our Old Testament reading today, Joseph is a type of Christ. His brothers had sold him into slavery and now they were begging him not to kill them. Why not? They deserve it! But Joseph reveals the reality of God's plan. No one can ever hurt us because God will take whatever they meant for evil and turn it for good. If Joseph's brothers had not sold him into slavery, he never would have become the Prince of Egypt. If he

had not become the Prince of Egypt, he would not be able to feed his extended Hebrew family. Even though it was surely irritating, scary and uncomfortable, God brought good from evil as He promises to do always.

So, if you were to withhold forgiveness from someone who is seeking forgiveness, you would only be doing it to stroke your own arrogant ego. God is in control, not us. God has been beyond merciful in giving His Son to pay for all our sin. And God promises to turn all things for the good of those who love Him. So, we forgive everyone, all the time and we never stop.

Imagine being in tremendous debt. When great debt is hanging over you, is it harder or easier to give? It is harder because you imagine that everything you give is increasing that tremendous debt. God has wiped away all your spiritual debt. You have no debt of sin so you are able to freely give of the grace that has been given to you. It flows from Jesus to us and from us to the world around us. Because God has forgiven us everything, we are free to forgive others.

Now, having said that, we are not God. When God forgives, it is like a switch. All our sin is wiped away and literally forgotten immediately. We are not God. For us, forgiveness is more like a thermostat. When it is really cold outside, is there anyone in your home who thinks turning the heat up to 90 will make the house

warm up faster? Or when it is really hot outside, does that person insist on turning the thermostat down to 62 to cool the house off faster? The temperature will rise or fall slowly as the boiler or the air conditioner works to do its job. You cannot make it go faster. When we have to give forgiveness, it is not a switch but a thermostat. We set the thermostat on forgive, but it takes time. We keep our faith fed with God's Word and Sacrament because that is the power that fuels forgiveness and we wait. It will happen. One day, sometimes quite surprisingly, we will discover that we are no longer hurt or angry and we have forgiven. Likewise, we give others the same consideration we desire. When we have hurt someone, we do not demand their complete forgiveness immediately. We request it and we patiently wait, knowing that God will move in his heart just as He moves in ours.

God promises to turn all things to our good. In Romans 8 St. Paul says,

"And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." God works everything to our good. We cannot lose, no matter what befalls us. Joseph knew that and so does Jesus. Forgiveness is our gift to give away because we have received more than we can ever use.