



The Episcopal Church of St. John the Baptist

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Homily for the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 17, 2017

Let us pray: God of grace, merciful judge, you are the inexhaustible fountain of forgiveness. Replace our hearts of stone, we pray, with hearts that love and worship you by forgiving beyond counting just as you perpetually forgive us. Teach us that there is no math to your mercy, that we may do likewise; in Christ's Name. Amen.

Once upon a time there were two brothers. Their father had a huge farm and, becoming too old to work, he said to his sons: "I wish to divide my farm in half, half for each of you. I know you will always work together and will love each other as brothers." They were as close as any brothers could be, sharing everything. One day, though, they argued and stopped speaking to one another. Years passed, but not a word was spoken.

One day a carpenter knocked at the door of one brother's house, looking for work. "Do you have a job I can do?" The brother thought for a moment and replied: "Yes, I do. I want you to build a fence at the edge of my property. Build it along the stream which separates my farm from my brother's. Build it high so that I won't have to see my brother's face ever again. I'm going on a trip for several days, but will pay what I owe you when I return." When the brother returned from his trip, he was shocked and dismayed that the carpenter had disregarded his instructions. Instead of building the high fence, the carpenter had built a bridge over the stream. Angry, the brother walked to the bridge to take a closer look, just as his brother was walking toward him from the other side. His brother began speaking: "Brother, after all the terrible things I've done to you over the years, I can't believe you would build this bridge as a sign that you forgive me and as a way to welcome me back." With that the brothers ran to each other and hugged, and wept.

The brother walked back to his farmhouse and asked the carpenter to stay. The carpenter shook his head, no, and said: "I'm sorry I can't stay. I must go, for I have many more bridges to build." And at that very moment, the brother looked into the carpenter's face and was certain it was the face of Jesus.

Peter must be in a generous mood, for he comes to Jesus with the question: "How many times should I forgive a brother or sister?" Then Peter provides a generous answer, "As many as seven times?" Now I would guess that the majority of us here this morning, often have found it difficult, we might even think impossible, to forgive someone who has wronged us even once. But seven times? No way! Israel's rabbis in Peter's day taught that to forgive once was generous. And to be wronged by the same person and forgive them a second time, that would be exemplary. But to be hurt by the same individual a third time and forgive them, bordered on being foolish and obsessive...time for revenge! So to forgive seven times was absolutely absurd by rabbinic standards.

Peter wants Jesus to set limits, the boundaries of forgiveness. "Give me a number, Jesus." But Jesus' answer shifts the focus to God's immeasurable and incalculable grace which, praise God, is boundless! Jesus instructs Peter, us no less, "not seven times, I tell you, but seventy-seven times." The literal translation of the original Greek is actually "seventy times seven," or (how is your math?) 490 times! Jesus is teaching us that we must forgive beyond our ability to count and keep track. In fact, if we're keeping track, it's not really forgiveness at all, because forgiveness is never a matter of law and limits, but of grace and gratitude; forgiveness isn't about math, but mercy. As we grasp the magnitude of the forgiveness God has extended to us by grace, our heart leaps with a gratitude, a thanksgiving which prompts us to forgive the neighbor, not just once, or three times, or seven, or 77, or 490 times, but always, always, just as frequently as God forgives us.

And Jesus drives his point home in the parable he tells about a king and his two servants. The first servant owes his master ten thousand talents. This was a ginormous sum. A single talent was about 130 lbs. of silver and, so would take a laborer about fifteen years to earn. Which means this servant owed the king about 150,000 years of income! Obviously, there's no way the servant could repay his master. Yet, in mercy, with compassion, let me say it, by grace, the king forgives the servant's entire debt, poof, gone, erased, wiped clean! Surely this servant must have been skipping off with inexpressible joy and thanksgiving in his heart. But, no! He comes across a fellow servant who owes him a debt: 100 denarii, a denarius worth a day's wage. So the second servant owed the first about a hundred days of labor, a little more than three months' worth. No mercy, no compassion, or forgiveness, or grace, the first servant has his fellow servant thrown into jail.

It's so obvious, so apparent, so straightforward: the debt of 150,000 years of income forgiven, and the debt of 100 days of wages not forgiven. Yet, we, we are that first servant! We more times than we are willing to confess happily receive the forgiveness of God, without which hell would be our only future, the forgiveness of the insurmountable debt of our sin, yet we are unwilling to forgive our neighbor, whether that neighbor is a relative, friend, co-worker, or sister or brother in Christ, forgive them for even the slightest wrong.

You hear me preach something with which you disagree, strongly perhaps, to the point of anger: forgive me! How have you come to think that priests are perfect, that I am perfect? Every Sunday at Mass, today is no exception, I confess my sin alongside yours. So, if I've failed you in some way, tell me, let's talk about it, but forgive me! It is the command of Christ! Or maybe the church's leadership, perhaps the whole vestry, has made a decision or done something that ticks you off royally. Forgive them; they're not perfect either! It is the command of our Lord! You're holding a grudge, and reveling in it, against a sister or brother in Christ, forgive that member, put the grudge behind. Grudges are all about the dead past; forgiveness is about life's future, and, also, reconciliation, and healing, and joy, and unity in Christ! Forgiveness unburdens and frees us! But an unforgiving heart is a heart in chains. Maybe a fellow member in this faith community spoke to you harshly in your view. Forgive them! Get over it, beyond it! They're a sinner just like you! This morning, as we share the peace of Christ, go to that fellow member you avoid every Sunday because of some wrong they have done, perceived or otherwise, shake their hand, maybe even hug them, and in sharing God's peace, sharing with them the miracle and the joy of divine forgiveness. Forgiveness is always divine! Forgiveness makes faith communities strong, and healthy, and vibrant, and filled with the Spirit, and united in Christ! The best churches are the churches that celebrate forgiveness, and revel in it!

There are times when what Christ calls us to forgive is monumental, heavy, serious, of great consequence, and oh-so-difficult! William Young in his novel, "The Shack," tells of a father, whose name is Mack, who confronts God at the shack where his precious daughter was brutally murdered. God asks Mack to consider forgiving the man who took his daughter's life. Mack gradually comes to understand that he is no more worthy of God's forgiveness than the man who murdered his daughter. That is a critical first step to forgiving someone else: to understand our unworthiness and own up to our sin. God says to Mack: "Son, you may have to declare your forgiveness a hundred times the first day and the second day, but the third day will be less and each day after, until one day you will realize that you have forgiven completely." As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. preached: "Forgiveness is not an occasional act, it is a constant attitude."

And the farmer looked into the face of the carpenter, the carpenter who built the bridge that led to forgiveness, and knew it was the face of Jesus!

† *In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*