



Lectionary 24, Year A

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16th Sunday after Pentecost: Gospel Text - Matthew 18:21-35

Matthew 18:21-35

²¹ Peter came and said to [Jesus,] "Lord, if my brother or sister sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" ²² Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."

²³ "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴ When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him, ²⁵ and, as he could not pay, the lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions and payment to be made. ²⁶ So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ 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.' ²⁹ Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' ³⁰ But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. ³¹ 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. ³² Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' ³⁴ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. ³⁵ So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

SERMON TEXT:

Grace and Peace to you from our Lord and Saviour Jesus the Christ!

Thank you for joining me today. I am Robin McCants and I serve as an Assistant to the Bishop for Justice Issues and Lay Ministry in the Southeast Michigan Synod.

I am so happy to be before you on this 16th Sunday after Pentecost, the long green season of becoming the church, full of examples of discipleship that helps us in our journey as children of God.

Today's Gospel comes from the book of Matthew, 18th chapter, versus 21-35.

We find Peter asking Jesus about forgiveness and after responding to him, Jesus tells the parable of the unforgiving servant.

Yes, Peter, the one asking about forgiveness is the one who will betray Jesus not once, not twice, but three times within a very short period of time.

Peter the one who loved Jesus so deeply but yet was far from being a perfect disciple.

It may have been Peter's intuition to ask Jesus about the number of times to forgive someone, not fully knowing how deeply he would betray his Lord.

But Jesus, being who he was, was all-forgiving to Peter, to Judas, even to those who called for him to be crucified.

Jesus lived so that we would have examples of what to do and how to walk the walk of discipleship, of forgiveness, and even loving our neighbor.

Now as we talk about forgiveness, just in our own experiences we know that it does not come easily, nor does it work itself out the same for everyone.

The same hurt can be held differently between two individuals who have a shared experience, be it an injury or trauma received by the actions of another, how we forgive is never to be taken lightly, and it is rarely quick or simple.

Processing what happens to us can include many of our senses and abilities. It might hit the head harder than it hits the heart, or the stomach, and maybe the eyes, if we see something that triggers a memory of hurt that was caused by someone or something else.

Moving through those stages of forgiveness eventually releases us from carrying a heavy burden through our lives that we are not meant to carry.

I would suggest that because many of us experience hurt and then have to find a way out of the depth of its impact, and the struggles that come with that journey is why forgiveness is studied by experts.

Alaska Behavioral Health says the science of forgiveness is clear: that it's one of the most powerful tools we have access to for healing both our minds and our bodies. Forgiveness is associated with lower stress, lower risk of heart attack, improved cholesterol levels, and better sleep, amongst other benefits.

If forgiveness can do all of that for us as individuals, can you imagine what forgiveness can do for us as a community?

In our gospel, there was forgiveness from the top, and then things got a bit twisted in the middle of the scripture when the one who was forgiven of his debt chose to enforce a sentence upon the one who owed him.

After receiving mercy from the lord for the debt he owed, the slave chose to ignore that gift when demanding a debt owed to him to be paid.

But then, the community rallied in support of the one who was jailed.

It was Professor John T Carrol, who asked, "How do communities of faith practice both mercy and justice", as we consider both accountability for harmful actions and abuses of power.

When do we turn our individual forgiveness, mercy and justice into that of a community-based faith response?

As the first slave's plea for patience is not only received by his lord, but the slaves's family is also allowed to remain free from the

debt and not be sold to cover the debt. The slave has been given an opportunity to be humble and show mercy for the gift given to him.

The slave who received mercy did not have the same for the one indebted to him. The response of the people to their lord was a big thing!

Collectively, they decided to do something for the one who was treated poorly.

As we recognize that we are still in the season of Pentecost, it is worth noting that the Holy Spirit that landed on the disciples is the same one that lands upon us - in our heart, mind and spirit as well.

It helps us to get moving towards what we are called to do - individually and collectively.

It calls us to use our individual gifts for God's glory, and for the purpose of showing each other how important we are.

Not all of our experiences will be easy and joyful; some of them will be extremely hard. If it's the right thing to do, and the community is united in action and purpose there will be support to get through it all together.

The stirring of the Holy Spirit may not always be comfortable as it calls for us to change, or to be changed. And we have the strength of the Holy Spirit to push us through.

For this community of believers - who wanted justice for the one who was jailed - a lot of variables can come into play.

Who knew the details of the situation?

Who began to organize the community to inform everyone of what happened?

What would the next steps be, before going to the lord with information about the jailed one's dilemma?

How will all of the pieces of the puzzle be put together? Better yet, who is designing the puzzle.

Who needs to be at the table, and at what stages of the project will they be brought in?

This is the one that will get us tripped up, because who is at the table may include a few folks who are not on the same page.

What is the ultimate goal and what is needed to make it happen?

When we're not all on the same page of the project, there can be times when feelings are hurt, accusations are made, heated discussions take place and it can become a very tense time.

So when all the energy is high and things are said, maybe it ends with hurt feelings. Does that mean the ones hurt will leave the table and not return? Maybe. Maybe not.

Luke 6:31 tells us to treat one another the way we want to be treated.

Maybe it could be interpreted to treat one another the way Jesus would want to be treated - with fairness, mercy, grace. With love and respect. With compassion.

The ELCA celebrates "God's Work. Our Hands. Sunday" on the second Sunday of September - today actually! This is a time when thousands of Lutherans will "put their faith in action on this annual dedicated day of service."

You will find congregations across the nation volunteering for outdoor cleanup projects, assisting seniors, collecting items to donate, painting, building, moving materials, beautifying areas, sewing, cooking, knitting - you name it! It's a way to express God's love, thank folks for their service or to be kind to some who needs a hand up.

This is great! This is what our Christianity is about! Sharing what God has provided to all who are in need and to one another.

When our journey as a community of folks trying to build something together models what Jesus was doing with the disciples is done faithfully, we are on the right track.

However, much of what we have seen throughout history is one wanting to be over someone else. A government over another. A neighborhood that has power over another.

It has and continues to happen when we care less about one another and more about the power we can yield over one another.

In Romans 14, we read, "Who are you to pass judgment on slaves of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord[b] is able to make them stand.

Non-judgement can open the door for acceptance, especially in a time now where we are so judgmental and divided. Who comes into our community of faith may simply depend on how we treat those who are not like us. And could also be determined how we treat one another.

Mercy and grace can be given and received with some work. It can happen with prayer, asking God for the ability to release the tension of the hurt received. Not forgetting what happened, and still being able to live, in spite of it.

I think of Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston South Carolina where Dylann Roof, the 22-year-old accused of killing nine black churchgoers, including their pastor while attending Bible study.

The 2019 ELCA Churchwide Assembly adopted a resolution to establish June 17 as the "Emanuel 9 Day of Repentance," commemorating the martyrdom of Clementa C. Pinckney, Cynthia Marie Graham Hurd, Susie Jackson, Ethel Lee Lance, Depayne Middleton-Doctor, Tywanza Sanders, Daniel L. Simmons, Sharonda Coleman-Singleton and Myra Thompson by Roof, who was raised in an ELCA congregation. Pinckney and

Simmons were graduates of Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary, Columbia, S.C., one of the ELCA's seven seminaries.

The grace of the deceased family members in not choosing violence for violence is more than commendable. It says that their faith in God has allowed them to feel all of the feelings, but would not be led by the same hate that roof had for Black people.

The justice that came with his sentence didn't eliminate the pain. The ELCA's response to that 2015 event said to the families and the members of that community devastated by the loss "we see you and are not in this alone".

Justice of righting a wrong sends a message to the hurt that there will be better days ahead, if not right now.

We are not called to eliminate the pain, but we can accompany those who are in pain.

We can fight systems that target those on the margins.

The ELCA's Truth and Healing Movement provides opportunities to learn the true history and current realities of Indigenous people.

Just last year, the Southeast Michigan Synod was one of several that lifted up a memorial to the Churchwide Assembly to in support of Addressing Legacy of Indian Boarding Schools and the harm done to Indigenous people by the church.

As a church, we have the resources to teach about the past and to provide support going forward. We have the ability to show what

it means to love one another as Jesus loves us. God's love for us is limitless! It is available for us no matter what we do. It does not change.

We set limits for ourselves that we have to figure out how to lift so that we can share that same love that God provides us with others.

Community Justice is just one way for us to be organized to shout out that we will not sit idly by when injustice is happening all around us.

I invite you to explore those resources that the ELCA and even your synod provides that can become more than files on the computer.

Our church shares ways for us to engage in ministry! The very thing that Jesus asks of us ... through camps, for Prisoner Reentry, advocacy for our siblings around the world who are desperate to live without war, for children and more.

When we as a faith community can show the world how God loves us, even in spite of ourselves, the world can find a way to walk with us to be who God calls us to be, always and in all ways!
Amen

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