

Sermon – September 13, 2020
“Forgive from your heart”
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text: Matthew 18:21-35

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill, and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word. Amen

Good Morning! Welcome to the next to last Sunday in the summer of 2020. I hope that you have gotten all of your summer plans completed and are ready to move into fall. I want to thank Fred and Cindy for being willing to share their musical talents with us and for singing this morning. I also want to remind each of us to take time to check on our neighbors and sisters and brothers in Christ. Make a call, take a few minutes to reach out and connect with those who are struggling to find normality in the wake of Covid-19. We also need to give praise to God that we have been able to help a few families in our community who are in need, and I will ask us to pray that the rise in requests for help will not continue to rise, but if it does, I pray that God will enable us to meet the needs in our community.

We are in the Gospel of Matthew in the middle of one of five discourses where Jesus is teaching about the kingdom of God. Just prior to this morning's scripture, Jesus has taught about the response of the church to a member who is discovered sinning. Following Jesus' teaching on how to lovingly extend forgiveness in that situation, Peter asks the next logical question, "What is our response to one who has sinned against us personally?" As Peter asks his question, he has suggested that an appropriate number of times to forgive another would be seven. It will help us to understand Peter's suggestion if we know that the Jewish standard for forgiving was three. After forgiving three times, the person was considered to not be repentant and forgiveness no longer had to be extended. Peter has more than doubled this number, seemingly in hopes of setting the bar high enough that he has guessed the requirement for forgiveness in the coming kingdom of God. This is like Peter saying, "The bar for forgiveness in this new kingdom of God is seven times, right Jesus?"

We should understand how astonishing Jesus' response is to those listening. Jesus tells Peter, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." Some translations may read seven times seventy. The point is the same. Jesus tells Peter that in the kingdom of God, the number of times forgiveness is extended is beyond measuring. In fact, if we are even counting at all, we are missing the point. Those in the kingdom of God are to be a people who speak the language of forgiveness, loudly, quickly, clearly, and consistently. As soon as Jesus speaks this truth in answer to Peter's question, he tells a parable to make clear his answer to his astonished listeners.

Let me share with you this morning that this parable has many fond memories for Kay and me. This is one of the parables we used as a teaching lesson with the youth we worked with as team members in a juvenile detention outreach. The team would send out word through those who had previously been on a weekend that those who came would receive "outside" food. Translate that to McDonald's hamburgers, pizza, Kentucky Fried Chicken, and other items that were not served in the detention center's cafeteria, food items that these young men missed greatly and were all too willing to sit with us in order to get to consume them. I remember watching one young man eat seven McDonald's hamburgers at one meal and then had to smile when the nurse had to bring "medicine" for his stomach. We had no doubt that the draw was the food, but it gave us the chance to share the Gospel with them, and this parable was one of the lessons we used. Those who had been on a weekend before could come back and support us as we worked with the newcomers. The members of the repeat group would put together a skit for this parable. I recall their favorite parts of the parable were threatening the slave who owed a hundred denarii and then sending the first slave off to be tortured. They thought those were great moments. They also liked to take all of the play money we had and to make a point of how much money they had as the king. They did not stress the forgiveness part much, but that is what we taught. It was a key concept for these young men on their journey to encounter Jesus and a concept that was very difficult for many of them to embrace. They had been sent to detention by people whom they were often not ready to forgive and only with the Holy Spirit working in their lives could they come to a point of forgiveness. Let's look at the parable Jesus tells to his disciples. A king wished to settle accounts and this settling has with it the idea of judgement, a time of reckoning had come to the king's servants. The king starts with the big accounts, here a slave with a debt of ten thousand talents.

Let me explain how enormous a ten thousand talent debt is. A “talent” is a measurement of weight for metals and can be gold, silver, or copper. Let’s work with gold as our metal. The weight varies between 60 and 90 pounds for a talent. Ten thousand talents would be about 204 metric tons. Let’s convert that into something we understand, denarii or a day’s wages. A gold talent is equal to 6000 denarii, which means the slave’s debt is 60,000,000 denarii or 164,000 years of work to repay the debt. This is a very large amount. How this large amount of debt is incurred by a slave is difficult to understand. We should keep in mind that in Jesus’ parables, slaves are not common laborers, but are managers. This one is possibly a tax farmer, someone who has agreed to collect taxes for the king for a large area of the kingdom. The collection must not have gone well, and now our tax farmer is in massive debt. There is no way that he can repay this amount, and so the king judges fairly (maybe not by our thoughts) and decides to sell the tax farmer, his wife, children, and possessions. This is a common approach to settle debts that are not collectable. Those owing them would be sold as slaves. When this judgement is given, the slave begs for patience and says he will repay this impossible amount. The king then does something unexpected. He extends mercy and removes this large debt, forgiving the entire amount. This is an astonishing idea that a king would forgive such a large debt. Jesus’ story would cause the minds of his disciples to be filled with astonishment. And in Jesus’ parable, our tax farmer leaves the settlement session with the king a forgiven, debt-free man. Listeners would assume that he is filled with joy, relief, and gratitude as he goes out.

Now comes scene two in the parable. As the forgiven, free tax farmer leaves the presence of the king, he encounters a fellow slave who owes him a hundred denarii, an amount that could be paid with several month’s labor. The tax farmer violently seizes the slave and demands payment. We hear the same plea for mercy the tax farmer has just made to the king, and we expect that this forgiven one will extend the same forgiveness, or at least allow more time for payment of this far smaller debt, to his fellow slave. But that is not the case. The tax farmer does not forgive the debt nor make any allowance, but has the slave thrown into jail until he pays the debt. This is not at all what we would expect from one who has just been forgiven such a massive debt.

Now we get to the youth’s favorite scene where some of the fellow slaves witness this interaction, the tax farmer’s lack of forgiveness, and they go and report what they have seen to the king. The king summons our tax farmer and confronts him with his lack of forgiveness and

has him sent to the jailers for torture until all of his great debt is paid. Given the amount needed to be repaid, this is torture forever. I can just see the heads nodding in agreement as they hear of the justice the tax farmer has received, but then Jesus makes a final statement, “So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.” That statement should raise some eyebrows in the group listening and it should cause us to stop and wonder, “What did Jesus just say? Did he say that we will face judgement? I thought we were saved. Can we face judgement if we don’t forgive? When do I forgive? Who do I forgive? How do I forgive in this way?”

There are many other questions that this short scripture might bring to our minds, but these will get us started looking in more depth at this parable and what Jesus shares. Let me caution us as we look at the parables not to read too much into them, but to take them more at face value. It may help us to think of this scripture as two truths shared by Jesus separated by a reinforcing story that has overstated aspects to help us grasp the truths. The first truth is that we are to forgive others as we are forgiven, without limit. There is no limit to the forgiveness we receive and there is to be no limit to the forgiveness we extend to those who sin against us. The large amount owed by the tax farmer represents our sin debt to God, an amount we cannot pay. The king here represents God and those with debt are those who have sinned against God and others. Our sin debt, which is massive, is paid by Jesus through his death on the cross. God has mercy on us through Christ and, as we believe in him as our savior, we are forgiven of a debt we cannot pay. We receive mercy from God. The kingdom of God is breaking in and it comes with limitless grace in the midst of an evil world, but with its arrival also comes a limitless demand on us to forgive others. People in God’s kingdom receive mercy through God’s action, and as His people, we are expected to respond in the same manner to others. We are to live in a manner that constantly reflects this forgiveness or what we have been given can be taken away. At the end of this scripture is a second truth, “We are to forgive others as we are forgiven and if we do not, we will be judged.” These two truths are held in tension as they seem to oppose each other. We are to live as a people who are forgiving others as we are forgiven and if we do not, we will be judged. People in the kingdom of God cannot tolerate sin and should respond to it with confrontation and reproof, but as they respond they must always love and forgive without limits. Our forgiveness must be astonishing. If we are not loving in our confrontation, we have missed the point. Wisdom is required to live in this tension. Living in this manner demands that we look

to Jesus for guidance and seek to follow his example in maintaining these opposing pulls on our new forgiven lives. Sin has deadly and eternal consequences, and to help those found in sin we need a response that brings loving confrontation and discipline. But we must not forget that God searches out those who have strayed and wills that none will be lost. Forgiveness is an important aspect of building community. It is an astonishing example to those who are outside of the church looking at the lives of those who are seeking to follow God, and it is through forgiveness that great joy is found among Christians. The source of that joy starts with us remembering the forgiveness that we have been given (10,000 talents worth) and then realizing that all infractions for us to forgive are miniscule by comparison.

The primary instruction of the parable heard in Jesus' words is, "Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?" Mercy is a requirement for the people of God's kingdom. Not the stingy mercy that we give on our own, but astonishing mercy that marks the ministry of Jesus. Our tendency is to hold the small hurts that a brother or sister has given us as if it is a massive 10,000 talent issue. How much better it is to simply forgive. Extravagant mercy is what must be found in the lives of those who follow Christ. But mercy is not the only aspect of Jesus' followers found in this parable, there is also a focus on judgment. Can you imagine what the slaves would have thought of the king if upon hearing the tax farmer's response he had done nothing? People do not like the idea of judgment, but it is a part of Jesus' message, a part of his revelation of God to us through his life. God's kingdom cannot break in if evil is not being named and defeated. If there is not a concept of judgment, then there is no need for salvation. The idea of judgment in this parable is present to assure people that there will be a reckoning and that God will vindicate those who are oppressed. These two truths in tension drive us to another set of questions. How do we do this? How do we live as Christ did in the midst of such tension? As we seek to live in this tension and extend limitless forgiveness, at some point we will encounter a brother or sister who makes a profession of repentance for a sin against us, and we will have to decide if we believe they are sincere. Are we required to believe their words? Are we to grant forgiveness only to be sinned against again? We want to be found in error in this time of discernment on the side of those who are quick to extend forgiveness as God forgives us. All of us are sinners and fall short of the glory of God. As such, we need daily forgiveness for our transgressions, and as we are forgiven, we need to be ready to extend our forgiveness so that when our brother or sister falls, they do not lose hope of being restored in

meeekness. Christ does give to us discernment and will guide us through the Holy Spirit to judge the actions and intent of those who seek forgiveness. Christ's desire is for us to "be so candid and merciful, as to stretch out the hand to offenders, provided there be evidence that they are sincerely dissatisfied with their sins." ¹ We need to carefully examine the repentance we witness in our brother's and sister's lives, and then live so as to reconcile when we find evidence of a change of heart. Our goal as we extend the forgiveness that we have received is to do this in a manner that will help our brother or sister through our gentleness to rise again from their fallenness. We need to recall that we are to act as our heavenly Father does and meet sinners at a distance to invite them into salvation and to welcome them into community.

John Wesley speaks to our struggle in one of his sermons where he instructs us to bear a tender good-will towards those who sin against us. We are to use all mildness and softness of language in our discussions with them and are to remember to "Do good to them that hate you." We are to be those who "return good for evil." And if we find that we can do nothing more, we are to "pray for them that despitefully use *us* and persecute *us*." We are to be in fervent prayer for those who sin against us, and we are to be ever ready and quick to forgive. Do not be one who waits for your brother or sister to come to you and ask for forgiveness. Forgive their offense as soon as it occurs and love them when they come to you and when they do not. Unforgiveness is like drinking poison and expecting another to suffer. It is you who will be judged and will bear the consequences. Forgive the little offenses that occur and focus on the forgiveness that God has given to us.

Will this be an easy task? No, I am afraid that it will require much work from us to grow into the image of Christ and to be found as those who willingly offer forgiveness to all. Here in this parable when the question is asked by Peter, it is for our brother or sister in Christ, other Christians. In the Lord's prayer, as we prayed earlier, the teaching is for us to be forgiven as we forgive those who trespass against us. In the Lord's prayer, Jesus teaches us to forgive all. This is the language that we as Christians are to speak, live, and astonish others with as we are out in the world. This is part of our witness to Christ, to be seen as a people who forgive, not once, not twice, not three times, but a limitless number of times. This is what builds community and it is this that draws people to community. As we receive forgiveness of our great debt to God through his son Jesus Christ, let us also seek to forgive others for the small debts they incur to us. Do it now, do it today. Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Look to

the cross and focus on what God has done for us, the great debt that was paid on our behalf by Christ and turn and forgive your brother or sister from your heart.

Pray with me: Lord, we confess we do not extend forgiveness to others as you forgive us. Lord, lead us into new understanding of how to forgive our brothers and sisters that they may be restored into a community. Change us, Lord, to be a people known for extending limitless forgiveness to all. Jesus, help us to be remade into your image that we may joyfully give mercy to others. Amen.

¹ Calvin, John. Calvin's Complete Commentary on The Bible (Deluxe Edition) VOLUME 6 -MATTHEW TO JOHN: Complete Commentary In 8 Volumes (Kindle Locations 12275-12280). www.DelmarvaPublications.com. Kindle Edition.