

Sermon September 17, 2023
[Matthew 18:21-35]

On Forgiveness
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Grace and peace to you from God our Creator and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.
Amen.

“As a called and ordained minister of the Church of Christ and by His authority, I therefore declare to you the entire forgiveness of all your sins, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

We hear these words when we say the Confession and Forgiveness, don't we? Pastor Dan makes that same proclamation for the forgiveness of sins over this congregation, and I do, each week over my congregation at the Hearthstone in Greenlake. It's what we do, and we take it very seriously.

I remember the first time I said it out loud, I could hardly get the words out. It was almost as amazing as the first time I celebrated Holy Communion on my ordination Sunday. The absolution came the following week, my first week ordained. I was an associate pastor in those days at a medium-sized congregation in Fargo, North Dakota, and my colleague, the same pastor there for my ordination, arranged the service that Sunday so that I would have the opening liturgy and give the absolution. I wasn't prepared for how enormous that feeling would be. And when I returned to my seat to continue worship, he was there smiling at me, for he knew exactly how that felt.

To give the forgiveness of sin, the absolution is a big deal. It means we take seriously the petition of the Lord's Prayer, which says, “Forgive us our trespasses, as *we* forgive those who trespass against us.” Jesus gave us this petition for forgiveness, knowing full well we would need it. This petition is proof that the Christian life is not a practice in perfectionism. Rather it is the life of dying and rising, lived under the cross of Christ in the continual forgiveness of sin. This forgiveness so lavishly given, is poured out on us and overflows onto our neighbor.

When we consider the act of forgiveness of sins, we must consider the weight of which our sin burdens us, and others, and as the whole community, nation and world. And it is not just our *personal* sin that affects us. It is the communal sin, national sin, and sins of the world. And we feel the weight and the burden, don't we? We wonder over and over again when the weight of racism, homophobia, ageism, sexism, all the -isms, will heal, and we will look tirelessly to ease the pain for those who are attacked by prejudice.

Our nation is at odds; we see it as a painful result of hatred forecast in our nightly news, in our social media; and some experience it firsthand. Where does our complacency take us, and where does our rage lead us? And where in the midst of both do we find ourselves today?

If you are like me, you find it hard to forgive the acts of racial violence, the acts of violence against the LGBTQ+ population, our dear siblings in Christ, and anyone who is denied faithfulness because of their age. And if you are like me, when you hear these words of Jesus, you feel the sting, because forgiveness comes at a price.

When I was in seminary, I took a course on forgiveness. It raised many of the thoughts I've shared with you today. One thought that was about when forgiveness is impossible. We have to be realistic here. There are times when we're talking about more than just hurt feelings. We're talking about deep, agonizing frailties that burden us, and keep us from feeling open to the words, "Your sins are forgiven," because what has been done to you, or to a beloved, is unforgivable.

These are the moments when we cling to the promises of Christ. When I *can't* forgive, I have to remember that the ultimate forgiveness comes from Jesus. And when I have to remember that, I receive forgiveness for my lack of grace. And here's the good news: so do you!

Jesus says to forgive; it's important to remember that sometimes, forgiveness happens more than once. Jesus tells Peter, it happens 77 times. For us, as we make confession each week, it happens over and over again, doesn't it? Theologian David Lohs writes, "The parables in Matthew seem to often have something of an edge to them, but they are embedded in a larger story." This parable doesn't have to bear responsibility for telling the whole story of forgiveness. And one other important part of this story comes a bit later, again featuring Peter and the disciples, when Jesus says that the cup he gives, the blood of the covenant He pours out with his life, is the forgiveness of sin.

And these words are found only in the Gospel of Matthew. That is, these words do not appear in Mark's gospel, in his telling of the scene, or in Luke's narrative, or in Paul's remembrance; that they are in Matthew's Gospel, spoken on the evening when the disciples will betray, deny and abandon him, standing like a promise that even when *we* fail to live into the grace of Jesus, even when *we* fall short of extending to others the forgiveness we have received, yet God is still there, forgiving, loving, and beckoning us home.

Maybe that's the place we go. Maybe in hearing once again of God's forgiveness, our gaze will be lifted up from constant keeping of score that preoccupies us, to see God's hand opening in blessing. No guarantee of course, but just the promise of grace, and recognition that the ability to forgive is ultimately just as much a gift as being forgiven is.

And fortunately, we worship a God who abundantly loves to give us incredible gifts. Forgiveness isn't just something that only restores, even frees, the forgiven; forgiveness also restores and frees the one who forgives.

Forgiveness creates possibility, keeps the future open, offers paths toward the formerly not imaginable and breaks the cosmic law of relentless cause and effect to create something new.

Forgiveness is life.

So with this statement, “forgiveness is life,” We are given something new. Does “something new” mean to rekindle that relationship? Sometimes; sometimes we are able to come back into relationship with the one who has caused us harm – and sometimes we are not. For instance, will I ever be able to enter into relationship with the person who referred to me as “a dirty Jew” when they heard my maiden name was Mordecai? Probably not. Nothing I can or will ever say, will change their mind about the Jewish people. Or will stop me from being Jewish by birth. Does this mean my forgiveness is withheld? Certainly not; of course it doesn’t. Does it mean that I will work hard to build a relationship with this person? No. Building relationship is different from forgiveness.

Forgiveness is letting loose of the offense – part of our foundation as Lutheran confession, isn’t it? “We confess our sins and God, who is faithful and just, forgives us and renews us.” Do you see the difference between those two examples?

Let me give you another example. Racists do not see their actions as sinful. It will be a rare person who confesses their behavior and asks for forgiveness. And yet, Jesus does not tell that we will have the benefit of confession before offering forgiveness. Jesus says *to forgive*.

It’s harder than it sounds, isn’t it? When we come to the foot of the cross and confess our sins in the presence of God and one another, we do so with the very intention of receiving forgiveness. It matters that we confess. Confession promotes relationship, doesn’t it? It means that we want to come into the very presence of God, and to receive the forgiveness that only God can grant. It’s called “full communion with God.” And it means that we are at one in our relationship with God. When we do this for one another, we are strengthened, and we are able to live in the body of Christ together, and with one accord.

Forgiveness is one of the most difficult concepts we will ever face. Jesus makes it impossible for us to ignore it, too; Jesus not only *asks* us to do it, he does it *for us*. And we are the beneficiaries of this gift of forgiveness, restored and healed over and over again by the gift that comes from God in Christ Jesus.

Amen.