

September 17, 2023
Matthew 18:21-35

Pentecost 16
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Grace Beyond Imagining”

“So my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

Two of the central places of my childhood were Stony Brook School, which I attended from Kindergarten through Grade 6, and St. Peter’s Lutheran Church, which had been my family’s church home since 1924. My attendance at both my elementary school and church was very regular; I attended school Monday – Friday because the law mandated that children regularly attend classes lest they get a visit from the truant officer, and I attended church every Sunday because that was my family’s tradition and expectation. Before we gathered for worship, we attended Sunday school classes, and because my mother was the kindergarten teacher and my father Sunday school superintendent, there was no doubt that I would have perfect attendance every year. I truly enjoyed Sunday school (and for the most part elementary school) and learned many valuable lessons about the love of God and favourite Bible stories. One of the most valuable lessons from Sunday school that is still a regular part of my faith life today is the Lord’s Prayer, which we would pray at our opening Sunday school worship every week as well as worship in the “big church.” We were taught the familiar words that we still pray in worship and whenever we gather as God’s people, and I assumed that all Christians prayed the Lord’s Prayer the same way – until I began to visit other churches in our area. One weekend, I was staying with my Aunt Hilda, Uncle Richard, and cousins Heidi, Jon, and Michelle, who like most members of my mother’s family were Roman Catholic. On Sunday, I attended mass with them for the first time, and was fascinated with the trappings of their parish church and the way the priest celebrated mass. A lot of it was unfamiliar to me, but when it came time for the Lord’s Prayer, I felt that I was on familiar ground and enthusiastically joined the congregation in praying those familiar words – until we prayed the petition “deliver us from evil.” Believing that everyone had learned Jesus’ prayer as I had at St. Peter’s, I continued with the doxology “for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen” – by myself. I got dirty looks from my cousins, who whispered to me “shut up – we don’t pray like that!” I would later try to remember to “pump the brakes” at a Roman Catholic mass, where they end the Lord’s Prayer as Jesus concludes his prayer in Matthew’s Gospel.

A few months later, we were visiting family friends who attended a Presbyterian church, so we joined them for worship and Sunday school. While the sanctuary was not as ornate as my family's Roman Catholic church, it was a beautiful sanctuary, and I enjoyed singing the hymns and hearing the pastor's sermon. When it came time for the Lord's Prayer, I once again joined the congregation enthusiastically, and was doing well until we came to the fifth petition; while I prayed "forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us," the rest of the congregation prayed "forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." It was another lesson in the different ways Christians pray Jesus' prayer, and a lesson I remembered when I attended worship at the Presbyterian seminary where I studied in New Jersey.

While the ways in which we pray the Lord's Prayer may vary, it is the central prayer for all Christians who follow this prayer that was a part of Jesus' teaching on prayer in the Sermon on the Mount. Having taught them to pray in the certain knowledge that "*your Father knows what you need before you ask him*" (Matthew 6:8), Jesus goes on to instruct his followers to "*pray then in this way*" (6:9), giving them the prayer in which we always pray "*Our Father*" even when we pray by ourselves, knowing that we are bound together in Holy Baptism as members of the Church which is the Body of Christ. The Lord's Prayer is so central to our lives as Christians that we charge parents and sponsors who bring their children to be baptized to "*teach them the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments*" (ELW Holy Baptism). In his *Small Catechism*, Martin Luther continues the tradition of the Church in placing the Lord's Prayer along with the Creed and Commandments as the three chief parts of this teaching on the basis of the Christian faith. It is a prayer in which we praise God for his loving care for us and commit ourselves to living according to God's Will; in the words of Karl Barth, "*whereas the first three petitions announce God's lordship, the last three reveal that the frail human creature depends on that Lordship; we cannot live without God to feed us, forgive us, and lead us.*"

Among the petitions of the Lord's Prayer is the one where the Lutheran and Presbyterian versions differ; while "trespasses" and "debts" both speak of our sins against God, "debt" reminds us that sin is an obligation that we cannot repay on our own. Debt is used by Jesus as a metaphor for sin that is forgiven through Christ's death and resurrection, through which we are freed from "*sin, death, and the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death.*" (*Small Catechism*). We pray with confidence that God will forgive the debt of our sins through our baptism into Christ, believing that "*God's forgiveness is unconditional, precedes human forgiveness of other human beings, and is its ground and cause*" (M. Eugene Boring). But Jesus' prayer includes a challenging condition: we ask God to forgive our sins "*as we forgive those who*

trespass against us/as we forgive our debtors.” The prayer for God’s forgiveness is unthinkable for one who is intentionally an unforgiving person; “*we will receive God’s mercy only to the extent that we show mercy to those who have trespassed against us.*” (Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri). Whoever receive God’s forgiveness is placed in a new relationship that calls for and makes possible forgiveness of others.

- “We ask in this prayer that our heavenly Father would not regard our sins nor deny these petitions on their account, for we are worthy of nothing for which we ask, nor have we earned it. Instead we ask that God would give us all things by grace, for we sin daily and indeed deserve only punishment. So, on the other hand, we too truly want to forgive heartily and to do good gladly to those who sin against us.” – *Small Catechism*.

The issue of forgiving others as we have been forgiven arises in today’s Gospel lesson where Peter asks Jesus “*Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?*” (18:21). Peter may have had in mind the teaching of some rabbis who considered forgiving another person three times to be a sufficient cap on forgiving someone for the same offense. To Peter, forgiving another church member seven times would seem quite generous, reflecting Christ’s emphasis on forgiveness in the Sermon on the Mount (“*For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*” – 6:14-15). Peter’s proposal to forgive seven times may also be seen as a reversal of the sevenfold pronouncement of vengeance God pronounces to anyone who would harm Cain: “*Whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance.*” (Genesis 4:15). Peter’s proposal to forgive seven times sounds extravagantly generous, especially since there is no mention of repentance by the offending party.

Jesus’ response is not one of praise of his disciple’s extravagant offer of forgiveness; instead, Jesus goes far beyond Peter’s proposal, and not only in greatly extending the number: “*Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.*” (18:22). The Greek number can be translated as either “seventy -seven times” or “seventy times seven,” and is shorthand for an unlimited number (as in “the nth degree”). The difference between Peter’s proposal and Jesus’ pronouncement is not a matter of math or linguistics, but of the nature of forgiveness. Jesus’ response expresses a boundless willingness to forgive another person; “*Christians are to respond to sins committed against them with limitless forgiveness.*” (Mitch and Sri). Whoever counts the number of times one forgives another person has not forgiven at all but is only biding their time; as Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians, “[love] is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.” (13:5, NIV). The

kind of forgiveness Jesus calls for is beyond all calculation, and to illustrate the limitlessness of Jesus' forgiveness Jesus offers a parable centering on "*a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.*" (18:23). As Jesus uses hyperbole in his discussion with Peter, he now uses hyperbole to magnify the servant's dire situation and the boundless mercy of the king. The servant who is first brought before the king is not a household slave, but a subordinate official who had been entrusted with the management of the king's affairs. The debt that was incurred was through mismanagement of the king's resources and/or contracting to raise taxes from subject nations, not by personal expenditures. The amount owed is not realistic; "ten thousand talents" would have exceeded the taxes for all of Syria, Palestine, Judea, and Samaria. The amount is fantastic, beyond all calculation, and unpayable by the servant. At first, because the servant could not repay this debt, "*his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made*" (18:25). The enslaving of debtors was common practiced in both the ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman worlds ("*Now the wife of a member of the company of prophets cried to Elisha, 'Your servant my husband is dead; and you know that your servant feared the LORD, but a creditor has come to take my two children as slaves.'*" – 2 Kings 4:1). Casting the servant and his family into prison would be a punitive act; it will pay him back for his utter mismanagement, but it is still beyond the realm of possibility that the servant will repay his debt, no matter how much time he is given. In a last-ditch effort to save himself and his family, "*the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will repay you everything.'*" (18:26). The servant asks for mercy; and contrary to all expectation, the king responds with compassion: "*And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him his debt.*" (18:27). "*The master stuns servant – and reader – by cancelling the debt! Compassion, not harsh judgment, prevails.*" (John T. Carroll).

It might be assumed that a person who had been forgiven an incalculable debt (the equivalent of billions of dollars) would respond by "paying it forward" and offer the same kind of extravagant forgiveness to others; but that is not what happens next. Jesus' story continues as "*that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii*" (18:28a). While the debt of the fellow servant is microscopic compared to what the first servant had been forgiven, it was not an insignificant amount of money. A hundred denarii represented one hundred days' wages for an ordinary labourer (the "*usual daily wage*" in 20:2). When the servant who has been forgiven his enormous debt comes upon the person who owes him a considerable smaller amount, his reaction is quick and violent: "*seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.'*" – 18:28b). The king's mercy stands in sharp contrast to the servant's harshness; he uses violence to

pressure his fellow servant to repay a debt that is @600,000 times smaller than the one that was forgiven him. When his fellow servant asks for the same compassion for which the first servant had pleaded before the king (*“Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you’”* – 18:29), the servant does not respond to his fellow servant as he had been treated with compassion by the king. Instead, *“he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt.”* (18:30). *“Despite the debtor’s plea for more time (the same line that worked on the king-master), the creditor-servant refuses even this request and has the man imprisoned.”* (Carroll).

The servant’s outrageous behaviour toward his fellow servant understandably offends those who are witnesses to this ungracious act from one who has just received an act of incalculable generosity: *“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”* (18:31). This withholding of mercy prompts the bystanders to become whistleblowers, while *“the reader shares this outrage and is sympathetic when the other servants report this fellow’s conduct to the king.”* (Boring). When the king hears of this, his compassion gives way to rage:

- *“Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt.”* – 18:32-34.

The king takes back his forgiveness, and the unforgiving servant is condemned to eternal torment, since there is no way he could repay this enormous debt. *“The story had every chance to have a happy ending, but it ends in (well-deserved) disaster, in the abusing hands of his torturers.”* (Carroll).

Jesus concludes his parable with a “punch line” that underscores how important forgiving others is in the kingdom of heaven: *“So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or your sister from your heart.”* (18:35). Disciples should forgive fellow disciples limitlessly because God has forgiven us without limit. For Jesus’ followers, forgiveness is truly “the heart of the matter”; the same word used to describe the king’s “forgiving” the servant’s debt is the word Jesus uses in the Lord’s Prayer to describe how we pray to God to *“forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.”* Jesus teaches his disciples that they will receive mercy only if they show mercy to others; *“the parable illustrates, in an analogous way, the awfulness of failing to forgive as God forgives.”*

(Boring). Likewise, “*as those who have benefited from the generous mercy of God, we are called to extend generous mercy to others. It’s important.*” (Carroll).

- “God’s kingdom, the forgiveness of sins, has no limit, as the text of the Gospel so beautifully shows when Peter asked his question of the Lord. Jesus answered with a parable in which he earnestly exhorts us, in fear of the loss of God’s grace, to forgive our neighbour’s trespasses, without any reluctance, because God forgives us such endless sin and guilt ... And since God in his kingdom forgives us so much out of sheer grace, we ought also to forgive our neighbour a little.” – Martin Luther, 1524.

In the end, it does not matter how we pray the Lord’s Prayer: whether we end with “deliver us from evil” or continue with the doxology, or if we use “trespasses” or “debts.” When we pray the Lord’s Prayer, we ask that God will “*remember us in your kingdom, and teach us to pray,*” so that our prayer may reflect our faith in God and our desire to live in loving response to the forgiveness of sins that are ours through our baptism into Christ’s death and resurrection: “*for all this I owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him. This is most certainly true.*” (*Small Catechism*). As people who have been born anew to a living hope through our rebirth as God’s beloved children, we strive to live as our Lord Jesus Christ lived among us, to love as Christ so loved the world that he gave his very life for us, and to forgive others as fully and completely as we have been forgiven, knowing that forgiveness is truly “the heart of the matter” for our relationship with God and with our sisters and brothers who have been liberated from the bondage to sin and death through Christ’s death and resurrection.

- “Forgiveness often seems impossible, but nothing is impossible for God. The God who lives within us will give us the grace to go beyond our wounded selves and say, ‘In the Name of God you are forgiven.’” – Henri Nouwen.

My childhood experiences in worshipping in other churches took me across the street from St. Peter’s to Holy Cross Episcopal Church (the Episcopal Church is the expression of the Anglican Communion in the USA). I was glad to discover that the people of Holy Cross pray the Lord’s Prayer exactly as we Lutherans prayed it across the street; but I also discovered that they expressed their willingness to forgive others as they had been forgiven when they shared the peace of God immediately after their order of confession and forgiveness, a physical act of offering the same grace to each other that they had received from God. As we have received grace beyond imaging, as God’s people we are called to extend that same limitless grace and forgiveness to one another, because “the heart of the matter” for God’s people is that we live

according to the prayer that Jesus gave to us: that God will *“forgive us our debts/trespases, as we forgive our debtors/those who trespass against us.”*

Amen.