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Pentecost 17

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Alexandria, VA

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“The Cross of Jubilee”

Text: Matthew 18:21-35 (Genesis 50:15-21; Romans 14:5-9)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

“Then Peter came up and said to Him, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.” ”

Clearly, Jesus wants us to forgive others. And we are to forgive many times. Peter was not thinking correctly in putting a limitation on his forgiveness, and Jesus corrects him. Do not think of forgiveness in human terms, or according to human standards, of which there is a limit, an end. Forgiveness is not like that. Forgiveness is as deep as the love and mercy of God. So no, Peter, and no, brothers and sisters in Christ, do not forgive only seven times, but a limitless number of times! *Seventy times seven!*

Now, if you want to be strict about that, seventy times seven is 490. That’s a lot of times to forgive, and perhaps it is realistically and statistically impossible to keep track of forgiving someone that many times, and so, in effect, seventy times seven is limitless! But technically, its not. Technically, if you want to interpret that literally, it’s 490 times. So, what should we make of Jesus’ words here? Is there a limit to our forgiveness – even a very *large* limit? Or is this a hyperbole, like saying “You should forgive a *billion* times!” Or is there some other explanation for Jesus’ words here? An Old Testament explanation and tie in He is referring to, to help us understand forgiveness?

Well, I’ve given myself away, for I am going to take you back into the Old Testament, where the numbers 7, 7 times 7, and 70 are very significant. And so first, from Leviticus chapter 25:

“The Lord spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying, “Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When you come into the land that I give you, the land shall keep a Sabbath to the Lord. For six years you shall sow your field, and for six years you shall prune your vineyard and gather in its fruits, but in the seventh year there shall be a Sabbath of solemn rest for the land, a Sabbath to the Lord.”

So not only did God establish a Sabbath day, but He also established a Sabbath year, a year of rest for the land and His people – every seventh year.

But that's not all, for as we continue reading in Leviticus chapter 25:

“You shall count seven weeks of years, seven times seven years, so that the time of the seven weeks of years shall give you forty-nine years. . . . And you shall consecrate the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you, when each of you shall return to his property and each of you shall return to his clan. That fiftieth year shall be a jubilee for you; in it you shall neither sow nor reap what grows of itself nor gather the grapes from the undressed vines. For it is a jubilee. It shall be holy to you.”

And so not only was there a Sabbath day and a Sabbath year, but God also established a **year of jubilee**. And that year came after every 7 times 7 years, after 7 Sabbath years. And the purpose and meaning of the year of jubilee was freedom, forgiveness, and restoration. It was the proclamation of liberty to Israelites who had become enslaved for debt and a restoration of lands that had been lost or sold. And these Sabbaths and Jubilees were to be a time of not only rest for the people and the land, but also a time of celebration, for God's goodness and blessing.

Now, I suggest to you that in that context, Jesus' statement to Peter about forgiveness begins to make a little more sense. But there is one other verse that I think can shed some light here for us, and that is from 2 Chronicles chapter 36:

“He took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and to his sons until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia, to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed its Sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate it kept Sabbath, to fulfill seventy years.”

You see, even though God had decreed these years of Sabbath and Jubilee, when the people turned away from God and His Word, these festivals were also not kept. And so here and in Jeremiah, we learn the reason why the people of Judah were forced to live in exile in Babylon for 70 years. It was not an arbitrary number – it was the number of Sabbath years that had been missed. They had missed celebrating 70 Sabbaths, and so the land was desolate for 70 years of exile. . . . And notice! If they missed 70 Sabbaths, and the Sabbath year comes every seven years, that is 70 times 7 . . . !

And so when Jesus tells Peter to forgive 70 times 7 times, He is not simply giving a

really big number! He is not saying to just forgive “a whole bunch of times!” He is making reference to something very specific – to Sabbaths and Jubilees! To freedom and forgiveness and restoration! To forgive until our time of exile is over, and we are taken into the Promised Land of Heaven, to the Holy City of our God, the Heavenly Zion, the Heavenly Jerusalem. . . . How many times do you forgive? The whole time! Until in Heaven, forgiveness is needed no more.

And this is what we see in Jesus’ parable of explanation after He teaches this idea to Peter. The parable of the merciful king who forgives the debt of one of His servants. This was no small debt that was forgiven, for a debt of ten thousand talents was so large that it would most likely never have been paid back. And yet forgiveness is given for this enormous debt. And not only forgiveness, but freedom and restoration. The servant is released and free and should celebrate such a wonderful Jubilee for Him and His family! . . . But instead of celebrating, the servant does not keep the Jubilee. The freedom, forgiveness, and restoration given to him he does not give to another, but instead turns away and enforces, enslaves, and imprisons. And really without reason. For a debt that is very small. And then as we saw with Judah, the result of such ingratitude is exile, slavery, imprisonment. . . . The Sabbaths, Jubilees, forgiveness, freedom, restoration – all are gifts from God. Old Testament Israel did not earn or deserve them, they were given to them graciously and freely. Likewise for the servant in this parable – he did not earn or deserve this Jubilee, this freedom and forgiveness, it was a gift from the king, who in this parable is God. But when this forgiveness and freedom and Jubilee are ignored and scorned and abused, when the gift is despised, the result is that it is taken away, it is lost. The gift is not earned, but it can be lost.

“Then Peter came up and said to Him, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” The answer is really, “As long as it takes! As often as it takes. Until our exile is over. Until forgiveness is needed no more.”

Now here endeth the interesting and easy part of this sermon! Now the rubber hits the road. For this week we remembered September 11th. . . . One year ago, on September 12th, I stood out in front of my church in New York because I needed to put a new message on the sign that we had along the road. And I wondered what words to put out there. What could I say in just a few words that would send a powerful message to all the people who drove by? To all the people still stunned and shocked and confused about what they had just seen happen? . . . And I knew. I knew what I wanted to put on that sign. Just three words; words of Jesus that are among the most powerful He ever spoke. ***“Father, forgive them.”*** . . . Now, I didn’t put those words out there because too many people would not understand. They would have thought that I was excusing what had happened. They would have thought that I meant that our President should not retaliate

and punish those who did this. But that's not what it means. The President, the government, the military, is God's appointed agent to bring justice upon those who have committed these acts, and to protect us both now and in the future. That is their authority and responsibility according to Romans chapter 13, which we heard read last week. And we prayed, and continue to pray, that God gives them the godliness and wisdom to carry out their responsibility.

But that's not our responsibility. It is not for you and I, as Christians, to harbor in our hearts the same hatred and anger and bitterness that caused these people to do this – that's not who we are. Our responsibility is to forgive. Which is easy, by comparison, when it's a little thing, but what about when it's a big thing? What about for September 11th? Did you pray the Lord's Prayer on that day? Did you mean it? Did you mean it when you said, ***“And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us?”***

“Father, forgive them.” When Jesus spoke those words, He said it in the most desperate of circumstances, when He was losing His life for our sin, for our hatred and depravity and anger and malice and selfishness and greed and lust! He spoke those words while we were still His enemies, before we could ask for forgiveness. He spoke those words when He was suffering much more than you and I could ever imagine! And yet His heart was filled with forgiveness. With forgiveness for us, even while He was suffering for our sins. And these words were for you too. ***“Father, forgive them.”***

“Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Lord, how badly can my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?” Aren't they often our questions too? As if there is a limit for what we have to forgive . . . to who we have to forgive ?

We heard about Joseph in the Old Testament reading from Genesis. His brothers had sinned against him. A lot! As a result, for many years his life was a mess. He was taken as a slave to a foreign land. He was later falsely imprisoned. He was forgotten there by those he had helped to get out. He was separated from his family. And by all human standards, he certainly would have been justified in holding a grudge against his brothers! But he forgave. And in forgiving, he gave up his right for revenge. And he did so because he recognized that ***“you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.”*** A heart that refuses to forgive cannot make such a statement! It is instead fixated on the evil that was done against it and in light of that evil thinks that forgiveness is just not possible.

But dear brothers and sisters in Christ, do not fix your eyes on the evil, but on the cross.

The cross which was meant for evil, but God meant it for good. The cross where Jesus said, ***“Father, forgive them.”*** The cross which is our Jubilee, our freedom, our forgiveness, our restoration. And not only in the future, but our Jubilee even now! . . . And living now in our wonderful Jubilee of forgiveness, freedom, and restoration, we can look at things even as heinous as September 11th, and say ***“you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.”*** And then like David, we can forgive. We can give up our right for revenge, and know that even in this, God will work good. . . . It isn’t easy! And strangely, it takes courage. Some of you knew people who were killed at the Pentagon; living in New York my family and I were deeply effected; seeing hundreds and thousands of funerals; all the firefighters and police and rescue workers who lost their lives trying to save others . . . it may seem, for many, impossible to forgive.

“Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? . . . Father, forgive them.” . . . How can we forgive? Because in Holy Baptism we have been born again and raised to a new life in the image and likeness of Christ – the Christ who on the cross said, ***“Father, forgive them.”*** . . . How can we forgive? Because in Holy Communion we eat and drink the body and blood of Christ, and we are what we eat. . . . How can we forgive? Because in repentance and absolution, we are forgiven, and Christ’s words ***“Father, forgive them”*** are spoken to us, ***“I forgive you all your sins.”*** . . . And freed, forgiven, and restored in our Jubilee, Christ’s words become our words, we as Christians are now in turn able to give up our right for revenge, and forgive as we have been forgiven. Whether its little or big, frequent and infrequent, major or minor. It doesn’t matter. And living in Christ and the shadow of His cross of Jubilee, with our present and our future in His hands, we can say confidently with St. Paul, ***“If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.”***

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.