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Pentecost 17

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Taking Forgiveness For Granted?”

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.

There are so many things in this life that we take for granted.

We take it for granted that when we turn on the tap, good, clean drinking water will come out; that when we go to the supermarket, good, safe food will be available for us; and that when we go home, our homes will be waiting for us, with the safety of a roof over our heads. The residents of the Gulf Coast probably took that for granted too. But no longer.

Four years ago today, we took it for granted that terrorism is something that only happens to *other* people, in *other* parts of the world, in *other* countries. But no longer.

We take it for granted that when our loved ones leave the house, they're going to come back; that our friends and family will be there for us when we need them. But accidents happen. Friends can turn against us. Loved ones die. . . . And what else? There are so many things. What else do you take for granted in your life? That it will always be there? . . . What about *forgiveness*?

The parable of Jesus that we heard today warns us about that very thing. Peter starts the conversation out by asking a question about forgiveness – a question which takes forgiveness seriously: **“How often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?”** Or in other words: Lord, what if he's taking advantage of me? What if she's taking my forgiveness for granted. Do I *still* have to forgive her? How much is too much?

It is a question that has probably gone through each of our minds. Maybe about your neighbor, who is trying your patience. Or about your friend or co-worker who keeps saying he's sorry, but never changes. Or about the terrorists who crashed those planes four years ago today – can we forgive them? *Lord, how many deaths are too many to forgive?* There must be a limit; there must be a measure; there must be . . . well, accountability.

But rather than give Peter a direct answer, Jesus turns the tables on him. For it's always easy to talk about *others* – things get a bit dicey (and a bit more truthful!) when we are forced to

look at ourselves. So how much do you have to forgive, Peter? Well how much have *you* to be forgiven? By friends, by neighbors, by God? How much have *you* offended? Have you underestimated that? Have you taken that all for granted?

It is always dangerous to take anything for granted. It is even more dangerous to assume that we know the answers to our questions, as Peter did. **“How often must I forgive? As many as seven times?”** For our answers are invariably wrong. We are wrong when, with Peter, we think there is a limit to forgiveness. We are wrong when we think that when bad things like hurricanes or tsunamis or terrorism happens, it is God’s judgment on people. We are wrong when, like Peter, we think we are being *generous* with our forgiveness when in reality, we are being quite stingy with it! **Up to seven times!** It sounds like so many! And you know why? Because how often do we hold grudges and refuse to forgive even the first offense? Or if we manage to forgive the first or second or third (!), we feel like we’ve gone above and beyond the call of duty! What he did really hurt me, and yet I managed to forgive – God must be really pleased with me! (Pats on the back for everyone!)

Please! Do we hear ourselves? If there’s any judgment to go around, for sin, for rebellion, for not forgiving, don’t look *around* you for where it should start – look at your own heart. The unmerciful servant in the parable? He looks a lot like Peter and you and me.

But Jesus did not tell this parable to Peter and have it recorded in Matthew for us just to condemn us – although we *should* feel the weight of the Law in these words accusing us and crushing us! **But Jesus’ purpose in telling this parable is exactly the opposite.** That by hearing these words, we would learn not take His forgiveness for granted, but repent of *our* sins. That we learn to come to Him in humility and receive His grace. That we learn that His mercy and love go far beyond what we could possibly imagine. And that we rely not on what we can get from others, but solely on what we receive from Him. . . . From Him who, as Joseph learned, can and does bring good out of evil. From Him who claimed us as His own, so that as we heard in Romans, ***whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s.*** From Him who did not demand repayment from us, but first laid down His life *for us*, that we now can do the same for others.

For that is, at its depth, what forgiveness really is and why it is so hard for us! It is laying down and laying aside your life. Giving up your right for revenge, for satisfaction, for repayment, and letting go. It is to *release* the claim we have upon others. That’s hard because we think that will make us poorer. But Jesus would have us here learn that no, it actually makes us richer. For in holding onto our claims against others, in refusing to forgive the debts of others, we may (for now) gain a little, but we will (in the end) lose a lot.

And so if we have trouble forgiving, or if we find ourselves like Peter, questioning how often we must forgive, a good place to ask such questions is in front of the cross. For there

our little and petty thoughts and grudges are crushed – not by the guilt of the Law, but by the comforting words of the Gospel spoken by Jesus from the cross: ***“Father, forgive them.”*** Release them from the debt and guilt of their evil thoughts, words, deeds, and desires. My blood now pays for them. My death is in their place. My punishment is their salvation. ***“Father, forgive them.”*** Their debt is so great – greater than ten thousand talents, or all the gold and silver in the world. But even greater is my sacrifice for them. The life of the very Son of God is traded for your life. ***“Father, forgive them.”*** And the Father does. ***“The king released him and forgave him the debt.”***

And those words, those powerful, life-changing words, you are privileged to hear *here* every week. As coming and confessing your sins, you hear again and again those wonderful words: ***“I forgive you all your sins.”*** You hear, ***“Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins.”*** And those are not my words, but His, given me to speak to you. The forgiveness of the cross spoken again and again. Not just seven times, or seventy times seven times, for if there were a limit to these words, there would be a limit on the value of the blood of the Son of God! But as the value of the blood of God and His atonement is unlimited, so too these words, and the forgiveness they not only *proclaim*, but also *offer*, and *give* to you. And it is yours, truly yours, received by faith. There is not one part of your debt outstanding, that you have to somehow make up for. No! All has been released. All has been forgiven. You are free!

So do we then take that freedom for granted? As St. Paul would say, ***“By no means!”*** (Romans 6:2) Rather, the freedom that has been graciously given to us, we are now free to give to others. And this is what Peter had to learn. Peter, apostle and pastor, given this forgiveness to give *in the stead and by the command of Christ* . . . would have to learn. And you and me too. As Pastor, as people, in our places, in the lives and vocations we have been given to live, are to forgive. And if that means laying down your life for another, you are in good company. And could it be that in so doing, God is using *you* to bring good out of evil? To bring light to darkness? To bring faith where there was none?

That is the privilege we have been given as Christians. The privilege to not only receive, but to give. And so we pray not only for forgiveness in the Lord’s Prayer, but for our Lord’s grace, that His forgiveness would flow *from* us even as it flows *to* us. That as He has done for us, *we too may sincerely forgive and gladly do good to those who sin against us* (Small Catechism, Explanation to the Fifth Petition). God grant that it may be so for you.

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

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