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Pentecost 18

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“First Responders in a Sin-filled World”  
Text: Matthew 18:21-35; Genesis 50:15-21

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

Thursday was the seventh anniversary of the 9-11 terrorist attacks. Friday there was a horrific train collision in Los Angeles. And Saturday we saw pictures from the gulf coast - the aftermath of Hurricane Ike. That's enough bad news for one week, don't you think? A reminder of the sin in our world, and the devastation and havoc that it wreaks, continually, in our lives.

But as I watched pictures on TV of those events these past three days, even though they were three very different kinds of disasters, there was a striking similarity between the three. In all three, there were two groups of people: those looking for a way out, and those looking for a way in. Those people who were trying to escape the danger, and those whose job it is to rush into the danger - to help, to save, to rescue. Those rushing in are called “First Responders,” for they are the first on the scene when there is trouble, or danger, or need. And we admire those people, who put their lives on the line for others. We admire their courage, and bravery, and heroism. Which often goes unrecognized, unnoticed, and unthanked. Yet in they go, while everyone else is moving out.

*Which direction do you think Peter was moving in today? When he asked Jesus, “**how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?**” do you think he was looking for a way into forgiveness, or a way out? Was he trying to save, or trying to escape? Well, you know the answer. Peter thought as we often think, that there must be a limit to forgiveness, a maximum, a point of no return. Exactly where it was he didn't know, but it had to be *somewhere*. A point where forgiveness was no longer necessary, or possible. He was looking for a way out.*

But instead of going with the crowd and giving us a way out, Jesus today in His Word, is here to change the attitude of our hearts and minds; to change the direction Peter and you and me, look. That instead of looking for a way out of forgiveness, we look for a way in. That we not look to escape the *danger* of forgiveness, but rush in to help and to save. . . . **And yes, forgiveness is dangerous business.** You know it, that's why we're often scared to do it. Because it makes you vulnerable. You give up your right for revenge. It means you let go of the wrong

committed against you and won't save it in your back pocket to bring out and use as a club when you need it. It often means sacrificing your pride and honor and maybe even your ego for another person. To take the hit yourself, so that they may be helped and saved. And that's hard.

Especially when the other person doesn't deserve it! Right? Like all those folks who were told to evacuate before the hurricane struck, and didn't. And then when things get tough, they're the first ones on the phone, calling for help. If you're like me, your first reaction is: tough! You didn't listen, now lump it! You got yourself into this mess, now you get yourself out! Isn't that very "Peter-like"? They crossed my line, my limit. . . . And so it is with sins against us. Did those terrorists on 9-11 cross your line? Has your neighbor who keeps sinning against you exceeded your limit? Is that person who was so vicious and mean-spirited against you deserving of your forgiveness?

By nature, we don't want to forgive. We look for the way out. That's what sin has done to us - it has turned us the wrong way, and so our first instinct, our first reaction, is to run away from the danger of forgiveness. And so we need to be turned. Forgiveness doesn't come naturally. But rushing into danger doesn't come naturally to those First Responders either. They have to be trained to think a different way, to have a different attitude, so that when danger strikes, they do what they have been given to do.

And so Jesus, in response to Peter's question, teaches. Here is His class: "Forgiveness 101." He gives us **the Parable of the Forgiving King**. Sometimes it's called the *Parable of the Unmerciful Servant*, but I think the emphasis belongs on the King and his mercy and forgiveness, not the servant. The story itself is easy enough to understand, so I won't go through that again - what I want to do today is make it real for you. For this is much more than a story - it is what takes place here, every Sunday. For every Sunday, the King is here. Jesus is here, and we are the servants with a debt of sin too high to count or even imagine. All week we have sinned in our hateful thoughts, our stinging words, our hurtful deeds, and our lustful desires. And not only have we done these things, we've enjoyed them, and repeated them, and thought little about the damage we have done with them. And now here we are, and what do we say? I'll repay them? I'll make up for them? We know we can't. And so we say, "**Lord, have mercy.**" We don't deserve it, but "**Christ, have mercy.**" We've exceeded all limits, but "**Lord, have mercy.**"

*And He does.* Jesus, through the mouth of His called and ordained servant, says to you "**I forgive you all your sins.**" And not just once, but each and every Sunday, even each and every day, Jesus is here for you with His forgiveness, life, and salvation. That as often as you cry to Him, He hears, He comes, and He forgives. No limits, and no strings attached. He does, for Jesus is the once and for all time

“First Responder.” **He** was the one who responded first when Adam plunged us and our world into sin and death. **He** was the one who came looking for an Adam who was running away and looking for a way out. And **He** came not with a wagging finger and an accusing word, but with forgiveness and a promise. That **He** Himself would undo the damage ushered in by Adam. That **He** Himself would plunge into the sin and death that swirls around us, destroy it, and rescue and save us. **And so He did, on the cross.** There was Jesus rushing in where we run away. There was Jesus helping the helpless and the undeserving. There was Jesus taking the hit Himself, so that we could live. **In His death and resurrection, He did it.** And He’s *still* doing it, as He brings His death and resurrection here to us every Sunday, to give us life from the dead. Coming to us before we could come to Him in Holy Baptism. Coming to us who are trapped in sin with His Holy Gospel. Coming to us who are stranded and hungry and thirsty with His Holy Supper.

And in all these ways, Jesus not only comes to us to save with His forgiveness, but by His Word and life and Spirit, changes us and our attitude; turning us from looking for a way out, to looking for a way in; from running away from forgiveness, to rushing in to forgive. Now, that’s not easy! And it may take a long time. The roots of sin are long and deep in our hearts and lives. But through His forgiveness, Jesus is changing all us Peters into . . . well, *Josephs*. Folks who look not to avenge, but to forgive, and not only to forgive, but to lead others to also receive that forgiveness. Like Joseph. Did his brothers cross the line and exceed the limit when they hated him, and tried to kill him, and sold him into slavery? But we heard today how Joseph responded. And so too would our Lord have us, that we be “First Responders” to the sin in our world, and the sin against us, with the forgiveness that Jesus has given to us.

And if we’re not? Well, Jesus wants to be clear: **if we keep running away from forgiving, it will not be long before we run away from forgiveness.** The words at the end of the parable are not meant to threaten us, but to warn us and teach us. Because you cannot threaten someone into forgiving - threats can only make people say meaningless and empty words which they do not mean. No, the only way we become forgivers is by being forgiven. By coming here each Sunday, by falling on our knees every day, and by the Word and Spirit of Jesus, receiving His forgiveness. For then, with our eyes and hearts focused solely on Christ and His cross, we will live the life given to us. A life of love and forgiveness. A life of mercy and patience. That wherever you are and whatever you do, there be the cross of Christ. A beacon of hope and life in a world gone so horribly wrong.

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.