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Pentecost 15

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“165,000 . . . 2,000 . . . 77 . . . and Zero”
Text: Matthew 18:21-35; Genesis 50:15-21

[Some of the thoughts and figures in this sermon taken from the study for this text in Concordia Pulpit Resources, Vol. 27, Part 4, p 31-33.]

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

I'm going to do something today I've never done before and probably will never do again: I'm going to give you permission to leave and not listen to the sermon. Or, to at least fall asleep and not pay attention. But only on this condition: this offer is good only for those of you who forgive perfectly, always, completely, and abundantly. Who hold no grudges, plot no revenge, have no bitterness in your heart, never withhold anything good from someone else, and never make anyone earn their way back into your good graces. If that's you, you may go now, fall asleep now, or turn me off now. You don't need to hear this sermon.

But the rest of us . . .

Did the end of that parable frighten you today? *So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.* It should have. It's supposed to.

How often must we forgive? How much must we forgive? How much is too much? That's what Peter wanted to know. And Jesus' answer in this parable is simple: *forgive as you have been forgiven.*

But simple answers are often the hardest to do.

First, recognize the contrast between the master and the servant - not only with regard to the debt owed, but also in their attitude. Their attitude which shows what's in their hearts.

Ten thousand talents is an absurd debt. One talent was equal to about 17-20 years worth of labor. To work off such a debt would mean working something like 165,000 years. I don't even know how you could amass a debt like that! But maybe that's the point. The debt of sin we owe God isn't just what we accumulate in our lifetimes, by what we do - it's greater than that. It's debt that we have inherited, that has been passed down to us

from our ancestors. Like a snowball rolling down the hill, it keeps getting larger and larger. There's no possibility of paying it back.

One hundred denarii, however - that's pretty standard. A denarius was about a day's wage, so one hundred denarii would be three to four months salary. And this is the debt we accumulate against one another, by what we do. And while three to four months of salary sounds pretty big, it's nothing compared with the debt we owe God; the debt we could never possibly repay even if we lived some 2,000 lifetimes of 80 years each.

But "I'll pay you back!" the servant says. One of my children - I won't tell you which one - once began saving their allowance to build us a church. I appreciated the desire; it was cute that they thought they could actually do that. And maybe the master smiled at his servant in that way; it was cute to think he could actually pay back his debt when it was so obviously impossible. So that master had pity, compassion, on him, and forgave the debt. 165,000 years to zero in the blink of an eye! Or, maybe better to say, in the simple utterance of a word.

But cute didn't last long. That servant quickly turned ugly. Some think it's because he didn't really believe the master, that his debt really was cancelled. You can't do business that way; it was too good to be true. He thought that at best, he just bought some time, delayed the punishment just a bit. So he went out and went after someone who owed him - I need this money! Pay me! Pay what you owe! And when this servant speaks the same words to him that he had spoken to his master, there is no pity, no compassion, no mercy. The attitude is quite different. This servant who perhaps did not believe his master also did not believe his fellow servant. He had in his heart only violence, anger, and perhaps we could say, murder.

Why is it so hard to forgive? What makes Peter think seven times is enough? Why is it sometimes the little things, the little debts, that we hold against each other the most, or the longest?

Jesus told Peter *not . . . seven times, but seventy times seven*. Or that could also be translated - and sometimes is translated - as seventy-seven times. And I like that better. Not because it's a smaller number, so I have to forgive less! But because St. Augustine noticed something about that number. Seventy-seven was the number of generations from Jesus back to Adam in Luke's genealogy (Luke 3). Now remember what I said before: that the debt we owe God is so massive it's not just what we've done, what we've accumulated - it's also what we inherited; the debt that has been passed down to us, **from Adam**. *All that debt is forgiven*. The forgiveness of our master is not just for the debt of sin we have done (our actual sins), but for the debt of sin we have inherited (our original sin). All of it, from the beginning of time, all seventy-seven generations, has been wiped out - not in the blink of an eye, but in the simple utterance of a word: *Father, forgive them* (Luke 23:34). That's what Christ has done for you and gives to you.

Which is pretty amazing. And only possible because He is the eternal one, whose life spans more than 2,000 lifetimes, and whose payment for our debt, for our sins, on the cross, is even greater than we need. And now for us is His merciful and compassionate word of forgiveness, spoken here by the called and ordained servant He put here just to speak these words: *I forgive you all your sins, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.* And His word does what it says. Go, you are free.

Do you believe that?

I know that you do. But satan keeps telling us and wanting us to believe that you can't do business like that; especially not spiritual business. You need something else. And if we think that, then the joy of our Lord's forgiveness is taken away from us. And the forgiveness we don't have is the forgiveness we don't give.

Only when we realize that forgiveness really is ours, that it really is true, that it really is that abundant, that our hearts begin to change. The Spirit working in us what we need to forgive others.

Like Joseph. We heard about him in the Old Testament reading, and most of you know his story. His brothers were jealous of him and wanted to kill him. But instead they just - *just!* - sold him into slavery. He was taken to Egypt and lived as a slave there for awhile, but then languished in prison because of false charges brought against him. He was robbed of his family, robbed of his childhood, robbed of his freedom. His brothers pretty much took everything away from him.

And yet in time, God remembered Joseph and raised him up to second in command of all Egypt, second only to Pharaoh himself. So when his brothers came down to Egypt, looking for food because there was a severe famine, Joseph could have had his revenge. He could have done as much or worse to them as they had done to him. It would have been quite easy and, humanly speaking, he would have been completely justified in doing so.

But instead, he gives us a picture of Jesus. He speaks forgiveness. They meant evil, and they did lots of evil! And they buried Joseph under their evil. But God raised him up and used what they did for good. The Jewish leaders meant evil against Jesus too, and they buried Him, literally. But God raised Him up and now He speaks to us that same word of forgiveness.

And it's true. It really is true. You are absolved. You are washed. And you will receive again today the Body and Blood of the one whose death for you paid the debt you owe, now and forever. 165,000 years to zero, condemned to saved, in the utterance of a word, the splash of some water, and the eating and drinking of the Body and Blood that hung on

the cross for you. For your heavenly Father does not have patience with you - He has mercy on you, and therefore forgiveness for you.

And now says: *forgive as you have been forgiven.*

We pray for that very thing in the Lord's Prayer: *forgive us our trespasses* - sometimes that's translated, making the connection even clearer, as *forgive us our debts - forgive us our debts as we forgive those who are indebted to us.* With those words, we're not bargaining with God; that would be pretty foolish. We're asking that He work this very thing in us. That by His Spirit He give us the joy of forgiveness - joy in the forgiveness we receive, and joy in the forgiveness we give. And that as we cannot receive it enough, so we also not be able to give it enough. And that this really is how God's spiritual business is done.

So when you get the urge to hold a grudge, the next time you're plotting revenge, when you think you're going to make someone earn their way back into your good graces, or withhold good from someone . . . remember these numbers: 165,000 years, 2,000 lifetimes, 77 generations, **and zero.**

And whatever it was that seemed so important and seemed so big, let that little drop of resentment be drowned in that really big flood of love and forgiveness.

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.