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Pentecost 20

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Master’s Table of Forgiveness”

Text: Luke 17:1-10 (Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4; 2 Timothy 1:1-14)

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

Seven times a day I praise you.

We sang that in the Introit this morning. Words like that may have been the reason for the ancient monastic practice of praying every three hours throughout the day and night. At midnight, 3 AM, 6 AM, 9 AM, noon, 3 PM, 6 PM, and then 9 PM, the monks would stop what they were doing or wake up from their sleep and gather to pray. Most of us cannot imagine doing that. In fact, I would say that most of us have trouble doing that - reading God’s Word and praying - just *once* a day. With our lives getting more hectic, our schedules fuller, and demands on our time and attention ever increasing. But that’s why the monks separated themselves from the world and its demands. So they could do this.

But as hard as that seems, there is something else we heard today that is even harder. Another “seven,” which is not just a *description* of life, like this is, but a prescription, something we are told to do. Something we are expected to do. And here it is: [*Jesus said:*] ***If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him.***”

Tough words, yes?

If your brothers sins, rebuke him. We like that part. Well, sometimes at least. We like pointing out when someone has sinned, *but why?* Do we do it *so that* we can forgive them? Or do we do it to make them feel bad, to shame them, to put them in their place? And then when they repent, are we quick to forgive them, to let it go and not speak of it anymore? Or are we silent, brooding, to make them earn our forgiveness by feeling bad for a while, or by making up for what they did?

But sometimes, we are the opposite of that, too. We *don’t* rebuke our brother or point out his sin, because we don’t want to deal with it. It’s easier not to open that can of worms. So we just let them be. To live in their sin. To continue in their willfull disobedience, or in their ignorance. Which is really to say: *I don’t care about them enough to help them.* And so we either get hotter in bitterness, or colder in indifference.

But that wasn't even the hard part of what Jesus said here! For, Jesus said, *If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him.*

I've told my Bible classes: I am constantly amazed at how hard it is to repent. How hard it is not only to say the words "I'm sorry" or "I have sinned," but to mean them. We would much rather deny, make excuses, or justify ourselves. They deserved it. They did it first. Everyone else is doing it. Nobody's perfect. Which all might be true, but also beside the point. If you did, you sinned. Repent.

And then how hard to forgive. To let it go. To not put it in your mental filing cabinet to use again in the future. To not make that person first atone for their sin and earn your forgiveness. *If he repents, forgive him.* Just like that. No ifs, ands, or buts. Just do it, Jesus says. And even more, *if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him.* Which is not to say that the eighth time you're off the hook! The eighth time is when you get to really unload on him! No. Because forgiveness means not counting. And at other times Jesus also said to forgive 77 times, or 70 times 7 times. *Just forgive.*

Which also *doesn't* mean that if someone is abusing you that you have to let them keep abusing you. You can see to your personal safety and also forgive. And it *doesn't* mean that if someone is stealing from you that you have to let them continue to steal or not report them to the police. You can protect yourself and also forgive. It is to want to best for that person. To help that person. With correction and with forgiveness.

So no wonder the disciples then said to the Lord, ***"Increase our faith!"*** For how hard this all is, is an indication of how little our faith really is. Smaller than a tiny mustard seed, apparently, for Jesus said that *If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you.* And I haven't seen many flying mulberry trees lately.

So increase our faith. Help us to do this. Help us to trust that if we repent, if we forgive, we're not going to get abused and walked on and taken advantage of. Or that when we do, we're going to have what we need, 'cause from our experience, that way of life doesn't work in this world!

In fact, you know what that kind of life will get you? *Crucified.* Jesus rebuked the religious leaders for their sins (*How dare He!*) and He forgave sinners. He just forgave them. Freely. Fully. Even those who sinned more than could be counted. That had to be dealt with. Jesus was doing it all wrong. He should be rebuking the sinners and praising the religious! The good guys.

But that's the point. There are no good guys. *So you also, when you have done all that*

you were commanded, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.' You don't deserve a prize for being good. You haven't earned anything by forgiving. That's just what you're supposed to do.

So now you've come here, after your week of *plowing or keeping sheep*, of working in your jobs and living in your callings. How have you done? Have you done all that you were commanded to do? Are you worthy servants of the Most High God? I don't need to answer that. But Jesus did. He heard your confession and said to you: *I forgive you*. You don't have to earn My forgiveness. I'm not going to make you twist. It is yours. Free and full. And then even more, He says: *Come, recline at My table. Come eat and drink while I serve you*.

And you realize: this is a place so utterly different than the world. Here is a Master so utterly different than any other. Here are gifts not deserved but freely given. Not so we can continue in our sinful ways, but to increase our faith. To give us what we do not have. To provide us what we need. To transform us. That forgiven we may forgive. That served we may serve. And in so doing, praise the one who has done such great things for us.

For that is really what it means to praise God. Waking up every three hours throughout the day and night is not really what God had in mind with those words: *Seven times a day I praise you*. And in talking about forgiveness, Jesus didn't pull that number seven out of the air, out of the blue. Rather, He is making a connection here. That it is by forgiving that you are praising. It is by serving your neighbor that you are praising. It is by wanting the best for her that you are praising. For in all those ways you are being Christ to your neighbor. And you are showing him something far greater than a flying mulberry tree - you are showing her the life won for us by the tree of the cross. A life so utterly different. A life worth living. And a death worth dying.

That life - and death - starts here. Receiving from Jesus His life and forgiveness. And then taking it out into the world and giving that life for others. For family, for friends, maybe even for enemies.

It might mean crying out with Habakkuk: *How long, O Lord? Why is there so much evil in the world, and in me?* Or it might mean suffering with Paul. But even these the Lord is using for our good. That we learn to rely on Him and not on ourselves. That we look to Him for what we need. That we rejoice that in a world that often seems hopeless that we are never without hope. For we imperfect and unworthy servants, living in an imperfect and unworthy world, have a perfect and worthy Saviour.

And learning this too: that in Him we are more than servants. Much more. We are His children. And He our Father.

So if you didn't wake up at 3 AM this morning and pray, that's okay. You don't even have to repent! That wasn't a sin. But if you woke up this morning and remembered that grudge you've been nursing, or if you started a new one . . . If you did something this week, or failed to do something this week, and refused to repent . . . Or if you failed in any other way, and so many other ways, come now and be bodied and blooded. Come now and be served by your Saviour. Bring your sinful, dying flesh and blood to Him, and receive His forgiving and life-giving Body and Blood. For that's why His Body and Blood was born. That's why it hung on the cross. And that's why it's here now. For you. To mercy you. To mercy all.

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.