

17 September 2023
Pentecost 16

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“What’s in God’s Heart”

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.

The king didn’t care about the money. He cared about his servant. The servant didn’t care about his fellow servant. All he cared about was the money. Therefore they both did what they did. **What you do comes from where you heart is.** And with this parable today, Jesus is teaching us where the Father’s heart is. It is with us. Servants with a debt we cannot repay.

Jesus told this parable in response to a question from Peter, which was itself in response to Jesus’ teaching about forgiveness that we heard last week. That sin is serious, but forgiveness is greater.

Peter always takes Jesus’ teaching to heart. He doesn’t always understand it correctly! But he takes it to heart. And he does here. Jesus teaches about forgiveness, and Peter cares. He wants to know more. So, he asks Jesus, ***Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?***

And as some of you know, he is being rather generous with that question, for the going rate for forgiveness among the Rabbis was three. Forgive your brother - or sister! - three times, and after that, you’re off the hook! So by more than doubling that, Peter was being quite . . . well, he thought, *Christ-like*.

So imagine his surprise when Jesus completely zorches that thinking! ***I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.*** And for you math whizzes out there, yes, that makes 490, but what Jesus means by that number is this: *How often do you forgive? As often as your brother - or sister - needs it.* Multiples of multiples of multiple times, even per day, if necessary.

Now, we’re not told what Peter’s reaction was to that. I wonder if his jaw dropped open. Or if he just stood there silent for a bit, before Jesus, then, told this parable to help him. To help him understand more about God’s forgiveness. And not just how BIG it is, but *why* it is.

And you heard the parable - I’m not going to repeat it. But a servant was brought in who

owed more than he could pay. Much more. Far more. For the size of this debt, if computed in today's dollars, was far more than simply maxing out your credit cards - it was more like the size of a national debt! Which is absurd, that one person could owe so much. But this is a parable, not an historical account. Jesus is making a point by using such an absurdly large number. And the point is not just about the abundance of God's forgiveness - it is that! more abundant than we could ever imagine. Buy *why?* *Why* would the king forgive such a large debt? And the answer is what I said at the beginning of this sermon - this wasn't about the money. It was never about the money. He didn't care about the money. He cared about his servant. **And so he set his servant free.**

If he had cared about the money, he would have acted . . . well, like the servant then did. This newly debt-free, care free servant who went out and cared not about his fellow servant - because for him, it was all about the money. So no patience, no forgiveness, no love. He ***put him in prison until he should pay the debt.***

The king didn't care about the money. He cared about his servant. The servant didn't care about his fellow servant. All he cared about was the money. Therefore they both did what they did. **What you do comes from where your heart is. That's the Father's heart.** So, Peter, where is your heart? What do you care about? What's most important?

How often do I have to forgive? If it's all about you and what is owed you - whether than debt is money or pride or honor or whatever - you'll answer one way. But if it's about your neighbor and his need, you'll answer a very different way. As Jesus did. Who came to set you free.

So where is your heart? Is it on your stuff, yourself, your pride, what you have or want to have, or is it on your neighbor? If we refuse to forgive, why is that? And with this parable, Jesus would have us know, if we refuse to forgive, we are only hurting ourselves. **We are loving and serving the idols in our hearts** instead of God and our neighbor. *And that's never going to end well.*

And then we heard the story of Joseph today as well - a story of remarkable forgiveness. His brothers sold him into slavery when he was still young. Taken to Egypt, he lived in this strange country with a strange language and strange gods and strange ways, at times as a slave, at times languishing in prison. But God finally raising him up to power in Egypt until he was second in command, just under Pharaoh. So when his rascally brothers came before him, he could have done anything he wanted to them. *Anything!* And few would have criticized or condemned him for whatever he did. They had it coming. So what did he want to do to them? *Forgive them!* From the moment he set eyes on them, everything he did was for this one purpose: to forgive them. To forgive a debt - the stealing of a good portion of his life! - that he could never get back. That they could never repay. And when his brothers (like Peter!) didn't understand this kind of forgiveness, Joseph spoke marvelous words of wisdom: ***Am I in the place of God?*** . . .

You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.

Now what did Joseph mean when he said: ***Am I in the place of God?*** For some at that time would have said yes! Yes, Joseph, *you are!* If Pharaoh was considered a god, then the second in command was not far from it! But to forgive or not to forgive was not up to Joseph. What he is saying here is that he doesn't get to decide who gets forgiven and who doesn't. He is to forgive. And how that then turns out is above the pay grade of even the second in command of all Egypt.

Am I in the place of God? If he was, that would mean death - death for sin. For that's what God decreed. The wages of sin is death (Genesis 2:17; Romans 6:23). But God decreed something else as well. That He - the King, the King of kings, the King of the universe and all creation - would die that death for His servants. For all of them. No one excluded. The death of the cross for the freedom and life of the world. For the debt we all owe that we cannot pay. For God could throw us into prison, into hell, for non-payment. And He would be above reproach for doing that or whatever else He chose to do. Or, He could set us free by paying our debt Himself.

So what would God do? He would do what is in His heart. He would die so you could live He would be the captive that you be set free. He would suffer to give you joy. So that every time you pray, *Lord, have mercy*, mercy you receive. Every time you pray for forgiveness, forgiveness you receive. And as the catechism teaches us, *where there is forgiveness of sin, there is also life and salvation.*

Imagine how astonished that servant must have been to hear those words of forgiveness and release from his king! How astonished Joseph's brothers that their brother didn't hold a grudge and exact revenge. How astonished Peter must have been. *And how about you?* Maybe we take those words for granted, *I forgive you all your sins*, for we get to hear them every week. Maybe even some of you more often than that! *But don't.* Don't take them for granted. Realize what they mean, and the sacrifice behind them. Realize that the debt you've been forgiven is greater than even 70 times 7 *national* debts. And that you really are free.

And if you've been given that, and that's in your heart, what do you think you will do?

God calls to repentance - like with the servant in the parable - not because He wants us to pay Him back, **but because he wants to forgive**. Because He wants to be gracious and loving and forgiving. That's what's in His heart. And it gives Him joy! In the parable, we aren't told how the forgiven servant felt, or what the king felt - we're just told the facts. But how could the servant not have been overjoyed! And the king found joy in his servant's joy.

But that's also why the king found grief in his servant's wickedness. **When the idol of**

greed in his heart consumed the joy of forgiveness that he wanted for his servant. Because that's what idols, or false gods, do - *they consume*. They eat you up. They don't give, they just take. They take your joy, they take your contentment, they take your life. They did for the servant in the parable, who left the king's presence with joy, but was quickly consumed with rage. And that is what makes them so dangerous for us as well. Only seven times, Peter? Why only seven? Why not more?

Capital One asks: *What's in your wallet?* But this parable today asks: *What's in your heart?* And the answer is yes, all kinds of sin and vice and ugly stuff. *Wicked servant* stuff. But for us Christians, not just that. Because the life and love and forgiveness of Jesus has been poured on you and into you in Baptism, has been proclaimed into your ears, has been read by your eyes, and here it is for you to eat and to drink. And so what's in Jesus' heart is now also in your heart as a born again, born from above child of God. A child of God who wants to forgive and loves to forgive and rejoices to forgive. So if you find yourself starting to think like Peter and wanting to limit forgiveness, or acting like the wicked servant and demanding repayment for sins against you, repent of that. **Don't let your idols win.** Repent and receive the mercy and forgiveness from Jesus you need. Life-altering mercy and forgiveness. That sets you free from those idols that want to live in your heart! That sets you free for the love of Christ to control you instead. And with such freedom, life. And with such life, joy.

Today Christie will receive that life-altering Body and Blood of Jesus with us. The life and love and forgiveness of Jesus has already been poured on her in Baptism, it has been proclaimed into her ears, it has been read by her eyes, and now it will be placed into her mouth. She will take her place side-by-side with us, with Peter, with Joseph's brothers, and with wicked servants everywhere, to receive what we need. An abundance of gifts! Gifts she needs and will need, to strengthen her in the faith. And gifts Jesus loves to give. Gifts He died to provide. Gifts He rose to provide. Gifts He wants to give you. And not just once or twice, or seven times, or seventy times seven times, and not just for a life time - but gifts for eternity. For eternal life and joy with Him. For that's what's in God's heart, Jesus' heart. And now your heart, too. Amazing, astonishing love. *From the Father, 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.