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Pentecost 16

Saint Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Learning to Live a New Life”

Text: Matthew 18:21-35; Genesis 50:15-21; Romans 14:1-12

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

The Holy Gospel we heard today is tough. Whenever I read about it or hear it preached, it usually goes something like this: *Forgive, or else!* Jesus has forgiven you all your debt, all your sins, so you should forgive others. They haven't sinned against you near as much as you've sinned against God, so . . . forgive them. *Forgive them, or else!*

Now, there's some truth to that. But is that it? I know I should do that. I know . . . *But how?*

How can I be like Joseph? How can I be more like Joseph and less like the unforgiving servant? Joseph, who received nothing but wrong from his brothers, but forgives them, and the unforgiving servant who receives a windfall of forgiveness for his debt, but throws his brother servant into prison for his debt? It should be the other way around, right? That's the way we think. Joseph should throw his no good brothers into prison for what they did - give them a taste of their own medicine! And the forgiven servant should share his bounty with his brother servant.

I know what I *should* do. You know what you should do. We may even want to do it! To do the right thing. But actually doing it is another thing, isn't it? There's that something inside you and me that stops us . . . What is that? Why is it there? What can be done about it?

In this parable today, Jesus said this is what the kingdom of heaven is like. Free, full, lavish forgiveness. Very different than the world! As different as Joseph from the unforgiving servant. A different as light from darkness. Living in the kingdom of God is living in a whole new world. And to try to wrap your mind around that, think of it like a newborn baby being born into the world. That's an apt comparison, because that's what the Bible calls us. Newborn babes (1 Peter 2:2). Children of God (1 John 3:1). So let's think that way . . .

A newborn baby comes into the world and it has to figure everything out!

Everything is new - everything! There is light instead of darkness. There's a new way of eating. There's these weird things called clothes. And other people and hands and being poked - it's a lot! And just when you think you've got it figured out, something else new comes along!

So, one of the first things you have to learn how to do is flip over. And that's hard! But okay, got it. But then . . . wait! That's not it? Now I have to crawl? Okay. So you work on that, and begin to do that. Phew! Got it. Then . . . what? Now I have to get up? And stand? And walk? And run? There's always more. More to figure out. More to do for life in this strange world. And you know what? You fall down a lot! It's not easy.

That's Peter. He's been with Jesus a little while now, so maybe we could say he's learned to flip over, maybe even crawl, maybe he's even taking baby steps. He knows Jesus forgives a lot, so instead of just the standard for his day among the Jews, forgiving three times - he takes a few steps: ***Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?*** Not bad, Peter. Not bad. But there's more . . . You can't just learn to crawl or take baby steps, now there's walking and running! And so ***Jesus says to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven."*** And Peter's thinking: *More? There's more?*

Yes, there's more in this strange new world we've been born into; baptized into. This strange new world called ***the kingdom of heaven***. The old ways won't do anymore.

But here's the thing: learning to run is one thing. But it's no good if you run out into traffic! You have to learn to run the right way. The unforgiving servant, he ran the wrong way - he ran out into traffic and got run over. Joseph ran the right way, to His Saviour, to life. Part of growing up in this strange new kingdom is learning where to run. Or maybe we could put it this way: for the unforgiving servant, it was *all about the benjamins*, all about the money. For Joseph, it was all about *Benjamin* - his brother Benjamin, and his other brothers, too. Very different.

So last week, we thought about the trap of sin and death - the trap that we've been caught in, but which Jesus opens for us and sets us free. And Jesus did that by taking our place in the trap - by having our sin and death snap shut on Him on the cross, but then opening that trap in His resurrection. And so our sins are forgiven, our debt is paid, our death is overcome, and we are free.

But we then thought a little more about that . . . that after an animal has been caught in a trap and then set free, it's still hurt. It needs healing and strength. And so it is with us. We continue to receive the medicine of the Word and Sacraments so that we

can not just be set free, but then live this new life of freedom we've been given. And that's what the master in Jesus' parable did with his servant. If you listened carefully, it said that ***the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.*** *Two* things. He set him free and gave him his life back again. He didn't want him just limping around, hurt, but running around in joy and full of life. Like a newborn that has just learned to run that you can't slow down. For the master, it wasn't about the benjamins - and there were a lot of benjamins that were owed him! But it wasn't about that. It was about his servant.

But that unforgiving servant was still living in the past, still living the old. It was for him still about the benjamins. So he ran the wrong way. Instead of running to his brother servant with forgiveness to give to him, he ran to him to get the benjamins from him.

And the master, when he found out about that, took it personally. Can you imagine this scenario . . . the servant, after having been forgiven all his debt, then turning to his master and saying, *"Oh, by the way. I lent your wife a few bucks the other day - think you could give that back now?"* How do you think the master would respond to that? But isn't that really what happened here? For didn't Jesus say, *Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me* (Matthew 25:40)?

This new world, this new life we've been born into, baptized into . . . it's a bit different, isn't it? Shocking may be would be a better word for it! And I think Peter was shocked a bit at all this.

As I hope you are. For if the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God, was the same as this world, why bother? But just maybe it's a new world worth living in; a new life worth living. Joseph could have gone back to the old ways, the old life. His brothers took his life away from him and as good as thing were now, he could never get those years back. So now they had come to Egypt, hat in hand, not just for food, but for life . . . and turn around is fair play, right? And its what his brothers expected. That's how things work in this world.

But Joseph wasn't living in this world and life - he was living differently. A new life. And so ran to his brothers - not for the benjamins, for revenge, but with life for them. Forgiveness and life. Freedom. For while his brothers sold him into slavery, he had been purchased not just by the Midianite/Ishmaelite traders, but by someone else . . . He had been purchased (as Peter would go on to write later) *not with gold or silver, but with the precious blood of Christ* (1 Peter 1:18-19). Even in captivity, Joseph was living a new life.

And I think this is what the church in Rome was struggling with as well. The Epistle we heard today was St. Paul writing to a church where they were fighting and judging and despising one another. It was a mixed church of Jews and Gentiles, and that's what Jews and Gentiles did! That was the way! But that was the *old* way, the *old* world, the *old* kingdom, their *old* lives. Now, in Christ, born, baptized into a new world, a new kingdom, a new life and reality, it is different. They are learning how to walk, and how to walk *together*. So Paul tells them, ***For none of us lives to himself, and none of us dies to himself. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.***

So Joseph's brothers took years from his life; Jesus gave him eternal life. Joseph's brothers took his away freedom; Jesus gave him a greater freedom. Or as it is sung during the Easter Vigil: *to redeem a slave, God gave His Son*. And that's what God the Father has done for you, too. And now in this new world and life and kingdom, you're learning about life as His child. Living a life of love and forgiveness, living a life of love and care for the Benjamins around you. But it's not easy, is it? It's often shocking. *How many times? You want me to do what? You mean . . . ?*

And maybe you're still learning to flip over. Or maybe you're past that and are standing, or walking, or even running. And you can't tell by age. Some of you may be very old in this world, but very young in your new life. And some of you who are very young in this world may be running circles around us old timers! But however you are in this strange new world, this strange new kingdom, this strange new life so unlike this world and life, run or walk or crawl *to Jesus*. Come to Him for forgiveness, for washing, for food, for His Word of life. Hear who He is, who you are, and all that He has and has done for you. And then go live this new life. His life given to you. Forgive seventy times seven times, and even more. You'll shock the world! Maybe even shock yourself. And keep putting one foot in front of the other. And when you fall on your butt, your Saviour will lift you up again.

And when you are tempted to go back to the old ways, and choke your brother, and make it all about the benjamins instead of about the Benjamin, your brother, and make it all about you - *your* needs and wants and desires . . . remember Joseph, and run to Jesus. You can live the old life if you want to, and you can live it for eternity! But maybe there's a better way, a better life, a new one. And maybe it seems strange and weird and upside down and backwards and shocking now, and that you'll never get ahead by living this way. But the cross and the tomb looked that way, too! But Jesus transformed them, and He has transformed you. So learn this new way to live. And you won't just live it here, you'll live it *for eternity*.

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.