

**Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost A
Incarnation Lutheran Church**

FORGIVENESS

BEGINNING LAST SUNDAY AND CONTINUING TODAY, OUR GOSPEL TEXT COMES TO US FROM THE 18TH CHAPTER OF MATTHEW. THIS CHAPTER IS SOMETIMES REFERRED TO AS “INSTRUCTIONS ON LIFE TOGETHER IN THE NEW FAITH COMMUNITY “ - GUIDELINES FOR LIVING, MIND YOU, NOT AS THE WORLD TEACHES – BUT AS JESUS TEACHES. SO, LAST WEEK WE LEARNED THAT AN OPEN AND GENTLE WILLINGNESS TO ADDRESS THOSE WITHIN THE FAITH COMMUNITY WHO HURT US NOT ONLY LEADS TO RESTORATION - BUT EVEN MORE SO – IT IS THE PATH TO BUILDING AND MAINTAINING THAT FAITH COMMUNITY. TALKING, LISTENING, HEARING, RECONCILING, AND GROWING TOGETHER IN FAITH ARE INDEED WAYS OF LIFE WITHIN THE FAITH COMMUNITY

TODAY’S TEXT TAKES US A STEP – A BIG STEP - FURTHER. PETER HAS BEEN LISTENING CAREFULLY TO WHAT JESUS IS SAYING ABOUT CONFRONTING SOMEONE WHO HAS HURT YOU AND SO HE ASKS A VERY PRACTICAL, FOLLOW-UP QUESTION. “LORD,” PETER SAYS, “IF ANOTHER MEMBER OF THE CHURCH SINS AGAINST ME, HOW OFTEN SHOULD I FORGIVE? AS MANY AS SEVEN TIMES?” AND JESUS SAYS TO

HIM, "NOT SEVEN TIMES, BUT I TELL YOU SEVENTY-SEVEN TIMES."
PETER, YOU SEE, IS LOOKING FOR SOME NUMERICAL FORMULA, A
CHECK LIST, SO THAT IF AFTER SEVERAL ATTEMPTS THE OFFENDER
WON'T REPENT, YOU CAN JUST MARK THEM OFF. "HOW MANY TIMES?"
PETER ASKS. "MORE THAN YOU CAN IMAGINE," JESUS REPLIES - AND
THEN HE TELLS THIS PARABLE.ABOUT FORGIVENESS.

THERE WAS THIS KING, JESUS SAID, WHO UPON SETTLING
ACCOUNTS WITH HIS SLAVES, DISCOVERS THAT ONE SLAVE OWES HIM
TEN THOUSAND TALENTS...IN THOSE DAYS A DEBT EQUIVALENT OF
200,000 YEARS' WAGES. FOR US TODAY, THAT TRANSLATES ROUGHLY
TO A TOTAL DEPT OF \$3 BILLION. BUT, KNOWING THAT IF HE
DOESN'T PAY, THERE WILL BE DIRE CONSEQUENCES FOR HIM AND HIS
FAMILY, HE ASKS THE KING FOR PATIENCE AND PROMISES, SOMEHOW,
TO REPAY THE DEBT. THE KING, WELL, THE KING, OUT OF PITY FOR
HIM, FORGIVES HIM THE ENTIRE DEBT.

NOW, THAT WOULD BE A WONDERFUL STORY IF IT ENDED
HERE. IT WOULD BE EASY TO SEE THIS PARABLE AS AN ALLEGORY.
WE ARE THE DEBTORS. GOD IS THE KING. AND JUST AS GOD FORGIVES
US OUR HUGE DEBTS, SO WE, TOO, ARE TO FORGIVE OTHERS. BUT THE
PROBLEM IS, JESUS DOESN'T STOP THERE. HE GOES ON TO TELL HOW

THIS SLAVE WHO HAS BEEN FORGIVEN SO MUCH TURNS RIGHT AROUND AND REFUSES TO FORGIVE ANOTHER WHO OWES HIM A MUCH SMALLER DEBT. THE KING FINDS OUT ABOUT IT – AND RETRACTS HIS FORGIVENESS AND THROWS THAT ONCE-FORGIVEN SLAVE INTO PRISON.

AND THAT, MY FRIENDS, IN NO WAY FITS OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE GRACE AND MERCY AND LOVE OF GOD. IT TURNS GOD’S LOVE FOR US INTO A CONDITIONAL CONTRACT. THAT’S CALLED “IF –THEN” THEOLOGY. IF WE DO THIS – THEN GOD WILL DO THAT. NO! OUR LUTHERAN UNDERSTANDING OF GOD’S GRACE IS “BECAUSE – THEREFORE.” BECAUSE GOD HAS SO GRACIOUSLY AND FREELY GIVEN US UNMERITED, UNDERSERVING REDEMPTION, THEREFORE WE WILL LOVE AND SERVE GOD AND NEIGHBOR AS GOD HAS FIRST LOVED US.

SO, MOST SCHOLARS TELL US JESUS IS TELLING THIS PARABLE TO POINT OUT THE VAST DIFFERENCE BETWEEN HOW FORGIVENESS WORKS – OR DOESN’T WORK – OUT THERE IN THE WORLD AND HOW FORGIVENESS – SHOULD AND DOES WORK – IN HERE – IN THE CHURCH - IN A FAITH COMMUNITY.

AND GOD’S WAY IS TOUGHER! JESUS TEACHES US THAT GOD’S WAY OF FORGIVENESS REQUIRES MORE THAN WE CAN IMAGINE. AND

WE KNOW THAT – WE KNOW THAT WE HAVE BEEN FORGIVEN MUCH – AND THEREFORE WE ARE TO FORGIVE MUCH AS WELL. BUT THAT’S EASIER SAID THAN DONE....ESPECIALLY WHEN THE OFFENSE IS SEVERE, PAINFUL, DESTRUCTIVE, DAMAGING, HURTFUL, MEAN.....

SO, I GOT TO THINKING THIS WEEK – JUST WHAT IS FORGIVENESS, ANYHOW? AND WHEN I THINK ABOUT THAT, I ALWAYS REMEMBER OUR LITTLE NEIGHBOR CALVIN WHOSE FAMILY LIVED NEXT DOOR TO US LONG AGO. CALVIN HAD BEEN TAUGHT THAT IT DIDN’T MATTER WHAT HE DID AS LONG AS HE ALWAYS SAID HE WAS SORRY. WHEN HE BROKE OUT THE WINDOW IN OUR SON’S BEDROOM AND OFFERED HIS USUAL “I’M SORRY” – IT DIDN’T WORK. HIS MOM AND I HAD QUITE A DISCUSSION AND THEY PAID FOR THE REPAIR OF THE WINDOW. SO, THERE’S LOTS OF THINGS FORGIVENESS IS NOT:

- + IT’S NOT ACCEPTING A SHALLOW AND INSINCERE APOLOGY.**
- + IT’S NOT ALLOWING OTHERS TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF YOU.**
- + IT’S NOT A SHALLOW PARDONING OF AN UNREPENTANT OFFENDER.**
- + IT’S NOT SUFFERING INDIGNITY FOR SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS SAKE.**
- + IT’S NOT GETTING EVEN OR TAKING REVENGE**
- + IT’S NOT INSTANT OR PREMATURE**
- +IT’S NOT ERASING THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE BEHAVIOR**

+IT'S NOT EVEN WAITING FOR THE OTHER TO REPENT

WHEN ALL ELSE IS SAID AND DONE, FORGIVENESS IS "LETTING GO." IT'S THAT PROCESS OF MOVING FROM HOLDING ON TO THE HURT AND THE PAIN, FROM THAT VERY HUMAN NEED TO GET EVEN - OR EVEN TO EXACT REVENGE - TO LETTING GO AND LETTING GOD BE THE JUDGE AND THE HEALER. FORGIVENESS IS REACHING THE POINT WHERE THE PEACE OF GOD DWELLS IN YOUR HEART. IT'S TAKING BACK THE POWER ANOTHER HAS OVER YOU AND REMEMBERING THAT YOU - YOU - ARE CREATED A LITTLE LESS THAN DIVINE - THAT YOU ARE A CHILD OF GOD - A GOD WHOSE LOVE FOR YOU WILL NOT NEVER EVER BE TAKEN AWAY BY ANYTHING OR ANYONE - REGARDLESS!

HERE'S A STORY. I'LL BE HONEST. I'M NOT SURE I COULD DO THIS. BUT IT'S A STORY I HOLD BEFORE MY EYES WHEN MY NEED TO FORGIVE GETS DIFFICULT.

CORRIE ten BOOM'S FAMILY LIVED IN AMSTERDAM DURING THE WW11 YEARS. THEIR STRONG CHRISTIAN FAITH LED THEM TO BECOME A PART OF THE DUTCH UNDERGROUND AND FOR SEVERAL YEARS THEY HID, FED, AND PROTECTED THEIR JEWISH FRIENDS AND NEIGHBORS. IT WAS DURING THAT TIME THAT CORRIE'S MOTHER DIED, BUT THE FAMILY CONTINUED ITS WORK IN THE UNDERGROUND.

THEN, A "FRIEND" BETRAYED THEM AND CORRIE, BETSIE (AN OLDER SISTER) AND THEIR DAD WERE SENT TO A DUTCH PRISON. THEIR DAD DIED THERE WITHIN 10 DAYS AND THE TWO GIRLS WERE SENT ON TO THE NOTORIOUS RAVENSBRUCK CONCENTRATION CAMP IN GERMANY. THERE, TOGETHER THEY CONTINUED TO LIVE OUT THEIR FAITH BY TEACHING BIBLE CLASSES, LEADING SECRET WORSHIP SERVICES AND CARING FOR OTHERS. BETSIE DIED THERE IN DECEMBER OF 1944 AND SOON THEREAFTER, BUT DUE TO A HUGE CLERICAL ERROR, CORRIE WAS RELEASED - JUST ONE WEEK BEFORE ALL WOMEN HER AGE WERE PUT TO DEATH. CORRIE SPENT THE REST OF HER LIFE TRAVELING THE WORLD AND TELLING HER STORY.

ONE EVENING IN 1947 CORRIE HAD GONE TO SPEAK AT A CHURCH IN MUNICH WITH HER MESSAGE THAT GOD FORGIVES - EVEN THE VILEST OF THINGS GOD FORGIVES . SHE BELIEVED THIS AND SHE TAUGHT THIS. AND IT WAS THERE FOLLOWING THAT MEETING, CORRIE SAYS, THAT SHE SAW HIM, A BALDING, HEAVY -SET MAN IN A GREY OVERCOAT, A BROWN FELT HAT CLUTCHED BETWEEN HIS HANDS - WALKING TOWARD HER. HE LOOKED FAMILIAR AND AS HE GOT CLOSER SHE RECOGNIZED HIM AS ONE OF THE PRISON GUARDS AT RAVENSBRUCK - ONE WHO HAD TREATED HER, HER SISTER AND ALL

THE OTHER WOMEN SO CRUELLY. IMAGES OF HIS INDESCRIBABLE ABUSE AND TORTURE OF THEM Poured THROUGH HER HEAD. HE STOPPED RIGHT IN FRONT OF HER AND THEN HE SPOKE. "YOU MENTIONED RAVENSBRUCK IN YOUR TALK. I WAS A GUARD THERE, BUT SINCE THAT TIME I HAVE BECOME A CHRISTIAN AND I KNOW THAT GOD HAS FORGIVEN ME, BUT WILL YOU? WILL YOU FORGIVE ME?" AND HE STRETCHED OUT HIS HAND.

CORRIE SAYS, "I STOOD THERE WITH COLDNESS CLUTCHING AT MY HEART, BUT I KNEW THAT THE HUMAN WILL CAN FUNCTION REGARDLESS OF THE TEMPERATURE OF THE HEART. AND SO, SHE SAID, "I PRAYED, "JESUS, HELP ME." THEN, MECHANICALLY ALMOST, SHE PLACED HER HAND IN HIS. AND IMMEDIATELY, SHE FELT A CURRENT OF WARMTH THAT STARTED IN HER SHOULDER, RAN DOWN HER ARM AND INTO THEIR CLUTCHED HANDS. THAT WARMTH, SHE SAYS, WAS THE ANSWER TO HER PRAYER, THE VERY PRESENCE OF JESUS RIGHT THERE IN THEIR MIDST. AND SO SHE SPOKE, "I FORGIVE YOU, BROTHER, I TRULY FORGIVE YOU."

LIKE I SAID, NOT SURE I COULD DO THAT, BUT THAT IS EXACTLY WHAT GOD HAS DONE FOR ME. AMEN.