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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
The Midweek Liturgy, Wednesday, May 1, 2024
Matthew 18:21-35

HOLY GOSPEL Matthew 18:21-35, NRSV
Last week we read of the “little ones,” of the one lost sheep, and of grievances in the church. Now we read about forgiveness.

Before the Gospel:

- ☐ The Holy Gospel according to Saint Matthew, the Eighteenth Chapter:
- ☑ Glory to you, O Lord.

²¹Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” ²²Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

²³“For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; ²⁵and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. ²⁶So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ ²⁷And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’ ²⁹Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ ³⁰But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. ³¹When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. ³²Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ ³⁴And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. ³⁵So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

After the Gospel:

- ☐ The Gospel of the Lord!
- ☑ Praise to you, O Christ.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Last week we read about grievances in the church. Our Lord tells us how to go about settling things when a member of the church has been wronged by another member of the church. We noted that the goal of the procedure was to protect the reputation of the wrongdoer, in hope of regaining a brother or sister in the Lord. And so Jesus asks for a situation in which the wrongdoer can privately confess his or her sin and repent and get back on track.

Now, Peter comes along and asks, How often? It is a reasonable question for someone with a legal mind or with a sense that he is destined for leadership in the church. How often should we forgive a member of the church who has wronged us? Peter suggests a generous number: seven times. It is a nerve-wracking process to confront someone who has wronged you and to require repentance of that one. How many times should we have to go through it with the same person? Peter suggests seven times.

Jesus answers with a bigger number: seventy-seven times! Modern translations of the Bible all seem to agree with that number: seventy-seven times.

But in the old King James Version, Jesus gives a bigger number. And so we read this:

²¹Then came Peter to him, and said, Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times?

²²Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven. (Matthew 18:21-22, KJV)

That adds up to 490 times.

Truth be told, I like this larger number. The reason for that is the parable that follows — the parable of the unforgiving servant. The application of that parable to us is pretty plain: Our Maker has forgiven us *many* times, and so we ought to be willing to forgive one another too *many* times. That is only fair. It was pretty outrageous of that fellow who owed ten thousand bags of gold, but was forgiven, to turn around and refuse to forgive a fellow servant who owed a much smaller amount.

The first servant had owed ten thousand “talents.” A “talent” was worth about twenty *years* of a day laborer’s wages. So, a debt of *ten thousand* talents was a huge amount of money. The King canceled that huge debt. But the forgiven servant then turned around and refused to forgive the fellow servant who owed him a hundred “denarii.” A denarius was the usual daily wage of a day laborer. So, it was a significant amount — a bit more than three months wages — but it was nowhere near the vast amount that the King had forgiven. For the sake of this smaller amount, the first servant grabbed the second

servant by the throat and cast him into prison. It just was not fair to respond to such vast forgiveness by refusing to forgive in return.

In our Sunday evening Compline service, Pastor Carol often leads us through a pretty substantial confession. It goes this way:

☐ I confess to God Almighty, before the whole company of heaven, and to you, my brothers and sisters, that I have sinned in thought, word, and deed by my fault, by my own fault, by my own most grievous fault; wherefore I pray God Almighty to have mercy on me, forgive me all my sins, and bring me to everlasting life.
Amen

Now, if I spaced this confession out so that I confessed just once a year, I will have already used up 72 of my confessions. If the modern translations are right, then I would only have five more to go. Then I would reach my seventy-seven. That's why I like the larger number. I like the King James figure of seventy-times seven.

And the fact is, I have confessed more than once a year, and I have *needed* to confess a lot! I have fallen short far too frequently of the reverence that is due our God. I bet many of us have fallen short. Our Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit *created* us. We simply would not exist if our God did not want us here. And the Lord has given us air to breathe, food to eat, water and even wine to drink. He has given us clothes to wear, government to protect us, forest and field and mountains to refresh us, family and neighbors to cheer us up. And then there are the wonders of *salvation*, in which Jesus died that we might live. And there are the wonders of *sanctification*, in which the Holy Spirit has not given up on us but daily calls us to walk more closely with Jesus. But in exchange for all this divine goodness, we too often sin and turn our back on our God. Then, if we should have dose of good sense, we confess our sin and ask for forgiveness. We might even use the words of the Compline Confession:

...wherefore I pray God Almighty to have mercy on me,
forgive me all my sins, and bring me to everlasting life.
Amen

Then, time and time again, the Lord grants our prayer for mercy through the absolution entrusted to the pastor.

Time and time again. The Lord has forgiven us repeatedly. He does not sigh when we confess. He does not complain, "Here comes that Fryer person again, seeking forgiveness." No, our God is generous like the king in the parable. He stands ready to forgive many and huge debts.

Now, he asks us to forgive others. He asks us to be generous in our willingness to forgive. He asks us to be large-hearted. But this is not so bad. In fact, it is the happy side of the reality that we ourselves have been forgiven many times in the past, and unless we reach perfection soon, will need forgiveness again someday. Our God is generous. Our God is large-hearted and asks that we strive to be so too. And to this generous God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be the glory, now and forever. Amen.