

**Lectionary 24 A 2017**

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

September 17, 2017

Matthew 18:21-35

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

The gospel readings from Matthew in these late summer weeks have to do with the difficulty– the spiritual difficulty– of being a Christian, and of being the church. And today’s reading has to do with forgiveness. And the difficulty of forgiveness.

Forgiveness is pretty much the opposite of justice. Our religion talks about the importance of both. In order for there to be peace in the world– for there to be *shalom*, wholeness, wellness, peace, well-being, there must be justice and forgiveness. But forgiveness is pretty much the opposite of justice.

Peter today asks Jesus about how many times he needs to forgive another person. And Peter suggests that the right amount might be seven. And Jesus then says that the right answer is seventy-seven times, or seventy times seven, depending on who is doing the translating. But the number seven is getting thrown around and one reason is because it is the Jewish number that means totality.

And it is characteristic of Peter that he lurches forward in the right direction, but Jesus takes care to correct Peter’s fumbled passes. So this conversation is characteristic of Peter, but it shows that he is taking it seriously. Because forgiveness is hard. Especially the kind that matters. You can imagine all kinds of criminal things like sexual assault and murder, and you don’t have to go far to find addicted people who lie and steal over and over and over in the service of their addiction. Adultery is a pretty big betrayal. The wrongs that I find hardest to forgive are the ones that have no explanation. When people are just mean and vicious and lie and don’t stand to gain anything by it.

But Peter’s point is clearly about a relationship in which there is sort of an ongoing pattern where the harmful behavior is repeated over and over, and/or the person who has been wronged is just having a hard time getting over it. When the local clergy discussed this gospel this week, some of them were talking about forgiving and forgetting. Do you have to not only forgive, but also forget?

Luke’s version of this teaching of Jesus is somewhat different, and in Luke, the teaching is not triggered by Peter. Jesus says, according to Luke,

*“If your brother sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven*

*times, and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive him."*

Again, you hear that number seven, that number of totality. What kind of crazy situation would you be in where a person hurts you seven times in a row, each time repenting and asking forgiveness, and then turning right around and doing the same thing again, seven times in a single day. It must be a very long day.

But these remarks are made by Jesus because forgiveness is difficult. It's difficult in these real relationships where we ourselves are hurt. John F. Kennedy committed adultery, betraying Jackie. I can forgive him because I don't have any skin in that game, and he was dead before I was born. If my own spouse commits adultery, that's a whole other kettle of fish.

But for there to be *shalom*, for us to get healed and get on and get living we have to forgive. It is unjust. Next week, Matthew will give us yet *another* parable on the injustice of God's grace. But we have to forgive in order to get beyond. Sometimes the forgiver grows more and gains more peace than the person being forgiven.

I am convinced that behind this conversation between Peter and Jesus is the fourth chapter of Genesis. You may know that Cain murdered his brother Abel. These were the original two sons of Adam and Eve. Supposedly the first human family. Cain murdered his brother Abel. And so God sent Cain into exile. And Cain said to God that people in other towns would murder him once they found out that he was a murderer. Now when I was a boy, I wondered where all these other people and towns came from. I mean if Adam and Eve were truly the first human beings, then where did all these other towns and villages come from? And so Cain is sent away to live in the land of Nod, "east of Eden." John Steinbeck named his great novel "East of Eden." That poetic, sober name for life in the real world, the broken, real world that is not the Garden of Eden.

Anyway, when Cain is afraid that he will become a victim of murder, God says, No, and if anyone harms Cain, then God will punish them with seven times the hurt. That's in verse fifteen of Genesis chapter four. And then six generations pass. When I was boy, my Bible said,

*"And Cain knew his wife; and she conceived, and bare Enoch... And unto Enoch was born Irad: and Irad begat Mehujael: and Mehujael begat Methusael: and Methusael begat Lamech."*

Your eyes glaze over. But it was the seventh generation after Adam. The first generation after Adam was Cain. And God promised seven times the retribution on anyone who harmed Cain, the murderer. In the seventh generation, Lamech murdered someone. The Bible doesn't tell us anything about these people. But it stops to quote Lamech who brags to his wives that he murdered a guy who hit him. And Lamech brags that if God punishes by retribution seven times, then he, Lamech, punishes seventy-seven times. So Lamech, the seventh generation after Adam, is bragging about his own power to punish, not as God punished— with sevenfold vengeance, but with seventy-seven fold vengeance.

Genesis is telling us, in its very understated way, with poetic nuance, about the growth of

violence and retributive justice. It spirals. It grows exponentially. In chapter three of Genesis, Adam and Eve disobey God, and then in chapter four one of their children murders the other, and violence and counter-violence, attack and counter-attack spiral out of control. In chapter six, God will flood the world, and try to accomplish a reset.

So the proliferation of the number seven and seventy-seven in early Genesis is the background for this conversation between Jesus and Peter. If we want shalom, if we want peace, here, east of Eden, we engage in this very difficult process of forgiveness.

So to motivate Peter, Jesus gives what I would call a Lutheran sermon. I like this parable a lot because it's a Lutheran sermon. It may not be a very good idea. It's a sermon about the lavishness of God's grace. And Jesus seems to be saying that the lavishness of God's grace should make us more magnanimous toward others.

The money in this parable is exaggerated beyond anything realistic. There are two debtors. The lesser debtor owes something call 100 denarii. That's a Roman coin for one days wages for a laborer. So if a laborer in today's labor market earns one hundred dollars a day, then this is \$10,000. The other debtor– the guy at the center of this story– owes ten thousand talents. A talent is a brick of silver or gold, and somehow this guy owes ten thousand talents. It is unbelievably ridiculous. King Solomon– the richest and most materially successful king of Israel– in his prime, the Bible says, King Solomon's income was 666 talents per year. So this man, this servant, this slave, owes fifteen years of King Solomon's income. It's utterly impossible for someone to owe this much. But it's a parable. And he does. And his debt is cancelled. Calculating this amount in dollars is scholarly parlor game, but it's tens of millions of dollars, probably hundreds of millions of dollars. It's forgiven. And then immediately, within the hour, this guy runs into the other guy who happens to owe him \$10,000, let's say. And he violently attacks the man, won't give him additional time, and has the man thrown into prison.

So I call this a Lutheran sermon about the lavishness of God's grace. And the hopes that by being aware of that abundance of mercy, that love and forgiveness which is deeper than we can imagine– we owe God far more than we can even acknowledge– but being aware of that ought to transform our priorities and our actions. That's how Lutherans operate. We don't so much tell you how to live your life. We are a people of Word and Sacrament. We receive God's grace, we remember God's grace, we ritually re-enact God's grace, we try to abide in God's grace and we believe that will do more good than simply telling people to be good.

[Here I may insert an example from *Greater Tuna*.]

Perhaps what this parable says, and perhaps what Jesus says, and perhaps most of what Lutheranism says, is that people who live in glass houses should really slow down before they pick up rocks and start throwing. I would hope that in every faithful Christian community, we would accept the difficulty of bringing shalom back into this world, east of Eden. It's a tedious, self-sacrificing, constant ordeal to do what Jesus says, to turn the other cheek, the walk the extra

mile, to forgive seven times, or seventy-seven times. I think we need to be honest with each other, the church needs to be a place of honesty.

But the Church also needs to be a place where God's grace is pointed out. That the sum of money involved— ten thousand talents— is incredibly great. That God's mercy toward us and love for us is uncountable and cannot be repaid. And when we do those two things (that today's gospel reading does) when we are frank and honest about the difficulty, and when we strive to realize God's lavish grace, then we stand the best chance of being peacemakers, of creating joy and beauty, of achieving *shalom*. Amen.