

Sermon – 15th Pentecost
Matthew 18:21-35
September 13, 2020

“Kenny...I’m Tired of This”?

My first object lesson in this text occurred barely three months into my marriage. I don’t want to paint an impression that our early days were unusually rocky - I actually recall them as quite nice. But there were clearly learning curves to ascend, tendencies to discover, and...well...things to forgive...I guess. Marcella and I lived by my reckoning exactly a 7-minute drive from our church. Being a reasonable fellow, I didn’t see any reason to leave for the 10:30 service any earlier than 10:20.

Apparently, Marcella didn’t agree, and much to my astonishment let me know, first in a most unconventional manner, then in the most honest manner. Sauntering into our seats at church for what she imagined was the 7th time in the last 8 weeks at 10:32, we listened as our pastor finished his announcements and set the tone for his message that day, a message as luck would have it, on Matthew 18:21-35. *Have any of you ever had to forgive someone more than 7 times* he intoned....clearly intending his to be a rhetorical question only – a nice little sermon starter.

However, to his surprise and boy let me tell you mine as well Marcella’s hand shot up....quick. Suddenly and I’m sure quite unplanned, our pastor shifted gears into a bit of a dialogue sermon - *really Marcella, you have – when and who?* Polite Lutheran chuckles ensued from the rest of the congregation. And then she pointed....at me. I don’t mind a sermon whose subject is forgiveness – but when the object is me, I get a little uneasy. Had I forgotten our three-month anniversary? Failed to warn her about my golf outing with my buddy Keith that sorta intruded on our Saturday together the day before...answered the phone with her mother on the line (again) in a less than enthusiastic manner....what?

No, I learned on a rather icy ride home...Kenny, I’m tired of being late for church. Now I may be embellishing a bit in saying it had been 7 times out of 8 I denied her the ability to be in church before the prelude ended. But it was often enough, and I was indifferent enough to her feelings evidenced by increasingly defensive, terse assurances it took only 7 minutes to get to church, when I knew 11 was more like it if the lights broke our way that inside her it began to hurt.

Of course I could have gone on the offensive and told her I didn’t appreciate having to stop at Target on the way home “EVERY” Sunday to get a jump on their flyer specials. I could have reiterated that we’d turned down several invitations to Sunday dinner at my folks, a Nelson family tradition I might add, that “she” was determined to break and therefore I had a little grist for the ol resentment mill too!!! I probably did try to justify my transgression come to think of it - a tried and true method of escaping the need to confront a wrong, and since Eden the go-to human way, aroused in this parable of the “unforgiving debtor.”

When cornered with a sin, we either attack, equivocate or compare! ‘*Yah, but what about*’ is the way that line of defense usually starts. We go out and find our nearest debtor and throw the book at them. It feeds our innate desire for self justification...*I may err now and then but my sins either pale in comparison to yours...or they were brought on by yours....or they just don’t really merit being mentioned...cause somewhere someone (like you or them) is worse than I am.*

Witness the debtor in today's lesson. Bereft of any sense of proportion or gratitude, he waltzes out from under his enormous sentence and the sting of knowing how much he had been forgiven, and immediately shakes down a buddy who owes him a few bucks. What is on display here is the human soul and how much it needs saving. To drown how much we owe Almighty God, his song of mercy still ringing in our ears, we whistle songs of petty grievances against our neighbors, colleagues, spouses, fellow church members, ethnic or economic groups, anyone who happens down our avenue of irritation or retaliation at the wrong time.

And God sees through that self-righteous disguise which is why he warns us....forgive....or you will not be forgiven. That is why he taught us to pray...*forgive us our trespasses...AS we forgive those who trespass against us*. That is why the Christian faith and it only that finds hope in words spoken by an innocent but nonetheless convicted man, who said "*Father forgive them, for they know not what they do*". Forgiveness is complicated. To do so requires, as I learned one Sunday morning 35 years ago and still to this day need to re-learn we come out from our fortresses of pride and admit in more than a corporate confession or a private prayer – but to another human face, that we can be wrong – and sorry for it.

In prefacing this parable with the words "*the kingdom of heaven is like...*" Jesus is equating forgiveness with the reign of God – heaven's only occupants will be the forgiven...and the forgiving. And if you try to reduce forgiveness to a commodity rather than a disposition, if you try to say, as Peter did, that it can be done up to a point – only so much to go around than you've got the wrong conception of what forgiveness is. If you count how many times you've done it, your not really forgiving as much as storing up "UO..me's" – you are, as theologian N.T. Wright says, merely postponing revenge.

To forgive requires us to name the hurt we've suffered, and that entails risking that the one who did the hurting will heap all manner of excuses back at you, if they even admit a transgression at all. That is what I did to my wife 7 weeks out of 8 – and that was a petty thing. Imagine if you'll pardon me – I'd done something "really wrong?" But I was wrong to do what I did and if the scenario I've described touches a nerve in your soul or rings a bell in your mind – you're wrong to do it too.

God in Jesus Christ has relieved a mountain of debt from each of you. As he got closer and closer to Jerusalem and his cross, when he starting really drilling down on human sin, he was met with "*who is this man, who eats with sinners and touches the unclean telling us about my sin*" Crucify him.

Matthew 18 serves as a needed corrective for that, lest we continue to do the same. Forgive...as you have been forgiven. No excuses. How? Just like our lesson teaches us.

1. If you've been hurt, confront the offender and their responsibility. (as the King did)
2. Recognize the impact the offense is having on you (as the King's sentence points out)
3. Absorb the injustice you've suffered by pursuing forgiveness anyway (as the King's pardon did).
4. Commit yourself to a reconciled relationship (as the King's continued employment of the servant demonstrates)
5. Live an altered reality...you've just done something most amazing, most out of the ordinary...and most Christ like.

Go ahead. You can. Christ has done it for you. Christ will do it through you.

Bless the Lord O my soul, and all that is in me bless God's holy name. Bless the Lord O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits. Who forgives all your iniquities....who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy. Has He ever! AMEN