



Liturgical Day: The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

Date: September 11, 2005

Sermon Title: Forgiveness

What influence do you think God wants us believers to have on the world?

This past Thursday, the people of Saint Peter held an event that celebrated the difference the church can make in this world. 300 or 400 of us gathered at Grandview High School for an "Evening of Jazz and Comedy." It was a great show – with some super music and a lot of good laughs. After a serious two weeks of watching news reports from the gulf coast states, it was nice to have something to laugh about for an hour or two. But more than being a great show, it was a chance to celebrate the great influence our church is able to have on the world around us, as the proceeds from this event were divided between Selian Lutheran Hospital in Tanzania, the Lutheran Family Services Refugee and Asylee Program, and the ELCA Domestic Disaster Response.

Many of you were here on July 17th, when Dr. Mark Jacobson came to share with us the remarkable ministry that he is helping to lead at Selian Lutheran Hospital in Tanzania. We've been supporting his ministry for a number of years, and hope that our support can grow in the next few years. We just received a letter from Dr. Jacobson, inviting a group of us to make a visit to the hospital in Tanzania – a trip we hope to make during the summer of 2007. Their work in healing bodies, souls, and minds goes a long way towards healing families and communities as well – and is an image, for me, of the kind of influence God wants the church to have on this world.

Jim Barclay was with us this past Thursday evening. He is the director of Lutheran Family Services. They do remarkable work with adoptive and foster-care families. They also have a unit that works with refugee and asylee concerns. We've been working with them this past year to help the Badal family settle in to the Denver area. We hope soon to be working with another family as well. The work that LFS and LRS do with those who are trying to make a new start in our country is inspiring work – and is an image, for me, of the kind of influence God wants the church to have on this world.

Many of us have spent countless hours since Sunday, August 28th, glued to the television and pouring through magazines and newspapers, trying to get our minds around the incredible devastation caused in Louisiana and Mississippi by Hurricane Katrina. There is so much loss, and so much to do, it is hard to imagine how long it will take before that region of our country feels like home again for its residents. We, as Lutherans, are fortunate to have a Domestic Disaster Response team that was on the ground there before the hurricane hit, and will be there for many months to come (they are still hard at work in New York City, continuing their response to 9/11). They are using Lutheran churches as emergency shelters, providing support to congregational leaders who have lost everything but are still trying to care for their congregations, and helping to move essential supplies to where they are most needed. Their work in the gulf coast states is inspiring – and is an image, for me, of the kind of influence God wants the church to have on this world.

Those are three ways in which I believe the church is having the kind of influence on the world that God wants it to have, and there are many others that we could identify this morning. But the question I began with a few moments ago was not a communal question. It was an individual question: "What influence do you think God wants us believers to have on the world?"

This morning's Gospel lesson pronounces that at the very core of the influence you and I are to have on the world around us is the gift of forgiveness.

Jesus calls for a radical, unlimited forgiveness. In this lesson, Saint Peter approaches Jesus with the question of the day: "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?"

Peter is on to something here. He is beginning to realize that forgiveness lies at the

FIRST LESSON
GENESIS 50:15-21

PSALM
PSALM 103: (1-7) 8-13

SECOND LESSON
ROMANS 14:1-12

GOSPEL LESSON
St. MATTHEW 18:21-35

PRAYER OF THE DAY
**O GOD, YOU DECLARE
YOUR ALMIGHTY POWER
CHIEFLY IN SHOWING
MERCY AND PITY. GRANT
US THE FULLNESS OF
YOUR GRACE, THAT,
PURSUING WHAT YOU
HAVE PROMISED, WE MAY
SHARE YOUR HEAVENLY
GLORY; THROUGH YOUR
SON, JESUS CHRIST OUR
LORD. AMEN.**

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heart of what it means to follow Jesus. But he hasn't yet seen the depth or breadth of what Jesus envisions for him. Peter knows that if he is going to live into this new life that Jesus is offering him, he must learn to be forgiving. Peter's vision of forgiveness is generous. Here he offers to forgive more than twice as much as the tradition of his day suggested.ⁱ Still, it is a measured forgiveness. He wants to determine just how far he has to go, if he is going to buy into this life that Jesus offers him.

But with Jesus – with God – forgiveness takes a different shape. It is an unlimited forgiveness. It is a radical forgiveness. Seven times? No: but seventy-seven times, Jesus says – or as some translations put it: seventy times seven. Jesus teaches that to follow him means to be willing to offer forgiveness that that is more than can be imagined. Perhaps even more than can be counted. This message moves in a different direction than most of what we experience in this world. We are far more likely to know stories of determined vengeance than stories of profound forgiveness.

A recent movie "Avalon" looked at the life of an immigrant family who moved to Baltimore from Eastern Europe. The movie focused on two brothers in the early part of the 20th century, and showed how they grew up and their kids grew up and had bigger families and some of them moved to the suburbs.

There was something interesting that happened between the two brothers. As most eastern European families, they started out to be very close-knit. As they moved further apart, their relationship began to separate until somewhere in their late 50's, these two brothers had a rift develop, and they stopped speaking to each other. The relationship broke down for the rest of their lives.

You might wonder what caused this rift. A dinner was scheduled to be at the house of a nephew in the suburbs, and the families were all there ready to eat except for the one brother who was notoriously late. The families waited and waited till it had been almost an hour. Finally, the brother who was there said, "Cut the turkey. Go ahead and cut the turkey." Sure enough, they started carving the turkey and it wasn't 5 minutes later that the other brother showed up. He walked in, saw all of them eating and said, "You cut the turkey! I can't believe you cut the turkey!" There were words, he left, and that was the rift that began destroying the relationship.ⁱⁱ

It is a ridiculous story, if you think about it. But a story that is all too believable. We've seen stories like this in movies, in books, on television, and sadly enough: even in our own lives. An offense is committed, and every available ounce of energy is committed to retribution, retaliation, punishing the wrongdoer. The sad truth is, even though it is the "wrong-doer" who is being punished, everybody suffers. One who refuses to forgive causes as much damage to the self as to the other.

As disciples of Jesus Christ, we're called to forgive for our own sakes as much as for the sake of the other party. Because in forgiving, the mercy of God takes root in our hearts, and we become instruments of grace and mercy – the kind of grace and mercy that only comes from God.

Just this past week I read a story that really touched me. It is the story of a father and a teenage son. Their relationship was strained, and in the middle of a conflict the son tore out of the house and ran away from home. After waiting for a time, the father went searching for the son. The father searched throughout the Spanish countryside, searched throughout the villages. But he couldn't find his son, Paco. Finally, he entered Madrid, and as he wandered through the streets and alleyways, his despair grew deeper until he decided in his desperation to place an ad in the paper which read simply: "Dear Paco, meet me in front of the newspaper office at noon. All is forgiven. I love you. Your father."

The next day the father worked his way back to the square in front of the newspaper office and was astonished to see not just the son he hoped was there but 800 Pacos, all longing for forgiveness.ⁱⁱⁱ

It may not always be obvious, but we live in a world that is hungering and thirsting for the experience of forgiveness. You and I are called to be a people whose very DNA is shaped by God's gift of forgiveness. As today's parable shows, the question is not whether God has forgiven us. That question was answered on the cross some 2,000 years ago. The question is whether God's forgiveness has changed us in any significant way. Are we like that slave, who was forgiven a staggering amount of debt, but who in the same day, greedily demanded to be repaid by one who owed him far less? Or has our experience of God's forgiveness caused us

to want nothing more than to share that experience with others?

It is hard to forgive. On this fourth anniversary of the terrorist attacks our nation suffered in New York City, in Washington D.C. and in the state of Pennsylvania, we are reminded how difficult it is to be people whose first instinct is forgiveness. As we call to mind images of looters and murderers running loose on the streets of New Orleans, we are reminded how difficult it is to be people whose first instinct is forgiveness. As we consider the bitter divisions in the political and social climate of our country, we are reminded how difficult it is to be people whose first instinct is forgiveness. As we think of the personal pain and agony we have suffered at the hands of others, we are reminded how difficult it is to be people whose first instinct is forgiveness.

But this morning we are called to do that hard work. We are called to remember that disciples of Jesus Christ are people of forgiveness. Not just a forgiveness that clears our accounts payable (like the slave in the parable today), but a forgiveness that transforms our hearts. Not a measured forgiveness (like that of Saint Peter) but a radical and unlimited forgiveness. We are called, today, to become intimately aware of just how much forgiveness God has shared with us. We are called, today, to let that forgiveness so shape us that we can do nothing other than reach out and share that transforming gift with others.

As we reflect on this scripture, as Christ meets us this morning in the meal, may we be strengthened to live in just such a way. Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (September 11, 2005)

English Text: ^{iv}

²¹ Then 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?" ²² Jesus 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. ²⁴ When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; ²⁵ and, 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. ²⁶ So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ But 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.' ²⁹ Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' ³⁰ But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. ³¹ When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. ³² Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' ³⁴ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. ³⁵ So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart." ^v

Greek Text:

²¹ Τότε προσελθὼν ὁ Πέτρος εἶπεν αὐτῷ· κύριε, ποσάκις ἀμαρτήσῃ εἰς ἐμὲ ὁ ἀδελφός μου καὶ ἀφήσω αὐτῷ; ἕως ἑπτάκις; ²² λέγει αὐτῷ ὁ Ἰησοῦς· οὐ λέγω σοι ἕως ἑπτάκις ἀλλὰ ἕως ἑβδομηκοντάκις ἑπτά. ²³ Διὰ τοῦτο ὡμοιώθη ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν ἀνθρώπῳ βασιλεῖ, ὃς ἠθέλησεν συναῖραι λόγον μετὰ τῶν δούλων αὐτοῦ. ²⁴ ἀρξαμένου δὲ αὐτοῦ συναίρειν προσηνέχθη αὐτῷ εἷς ὀφειλέτης μυριάων ταλάντων. ²⁵ μὴ ἔχοντος δὲ αὐτοῦ ἀποδοῦναι ἐκέλευσεν αὐτὸν ὁ κύριος πρᾶθῆναι καὶ τὴν γυναῖκα καὶ τὰ τέκνα καὶ πάντα ὅσα ἔχει, καὶ ἀποδοθῆναι. ²⁶ πεσὼν οὖν ὁ δούλος προσεκύνη αὐτῷ λέγων· μακροθύμησον ἐπὶ ἐμοί, καὶ πάντα ἀποδώσω σοι. ²⁷ σπλαγχνισθεὶς δὲ ὁ κύριος τοῦ δούλου ἐκείνου ἀπέλυσεν αὐτὸν καὶ τὸ δάνειον ἀφήκεν αὐτῷ. ²⁸ ἐξελθὼν δὲ ὁ δούλος ἐκείνος εὗρεν ἕνα τῶν συνδούλων αὐτοῦ, ὃς ὄφειλεν αὐτῷ ἑκατὸν δηνάρια, καὶ κρατήσας αὐτὸν ἔπνιγεν λέγων· ἀπόδος εἰ τι ὀφείλεις. ²⁹ πεσὼν οὖν ὁ σύνδουλος αὐτοῦ παρεκάλει αὐτὸν λέγων· μακροθύμησον ἐπὶ ἐμοί, καὶ ἀποδώσω σοι. ³⁰ ὁ δὲ οὐκ ἠθέληεν ἀλλὰ ἀπελθὼν ἔβαλεν αὐτὸν εἰς φυλακὴν ἕως ἀποδοῦναι τὸ ὀφειλόμενον. ³¹ ἰδόντες οὖν οἱ σύνδουλοι αὐτοῦ

τὰ γενόμενα ἐλυπήθησαν σφόδρα καὶ ἐλθόντες διεσάφησαν τῷ κυρίῳ ἑαυτῶν πάντα τὰ γενόμενα.
³²τότε προσκαλεσάμενος αὐτὸν ὁ κύριος αὐτοῦ λέγει αὐτῷ· δούλε πονηρέ, πᾶσαν τὴν ὀφειλὴν
ἐκείνην ἀφήκα σοι, ἐπεὶ παρεκάλεσας με· ³³οὐκ ἔδει καὶ σὲ ἐλεῆσαι τὸν σύνδουλον σου, ὡς καγὼ
σὲ ἤλεσα; ³⁴καὶ ὀργισθεὶς ὁ κύριος αὐτοῦ παρέδωκεν αὐτὸν τοῖς βασανισταῖς ἕως οὗ ἀποδοῦναι
τὸ ὀφειλόμενον. ³⁵οὕτως καὶ ὁ πατήρ μου ὁ οὐράνιος ποιήσει ὑμῖν, ἐὰν μὴ ἀφήτε ἕκαστος τῷ
ἀδελφῷ αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ τῶν καρδιῶν ὑμῶν. ^{vi}

ⁱ When Peter put his famous question to Jesus, "How often should I forgive?" he already knew the right answer. According to rabbinic authority, the ritual reply was "three times, but on the fourth you shall not forgive." Thus Peter presents himself as overtly magnanimous when he volunteers as an answer to his own question, "As many as seven times?" (Len Sweet; PreachingPlus.com; "To Shred or Not to Shred.").

ⁱⁱ Illustration from a sermon entitled "Full Fledged Forgiveness" by Ron Martoia, 1/1/2001.

ⁱⁱⁱ Illustration from a sermon entitled, "The Game of Life: The Wheel Of Fortune," by Mike Foss, 9/15/2002.

^{iv} A list of Bible lessons for the coming weeks is available at www.elca.org/dcm/worship/church_year/lectionary.html.

^v St. Matthew 18:21-35, New Revised Standard Version Bible (© 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America).

^{vi} St. Matthew 18:21-35, The Greek New Testament, Aland, Kurt, Black, Matthew, Martini, Carlo M., Metzger, Bruce M., and Wikgren, Allen, (© 1983, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart). To display the Greek text correctly, choose Palatino Linotype font.