



Liturgical Day: The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Date: September 14, 2008

Sermon Title: Transforming Grace

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

Here we are – at it again. For two weeks in a row, now, Jesus is working to stretch our understanding of what forgiveness is all about. Last week, he spoke about sin and forgiveness in Christian community, reminding us that this is what we are all about. If one of us has sinned against another of us, we are not right as a community, and we are called to do everything we can to put it right. Face-to-face meetings. Mediated visits with observers. Formal hearings within the congregation. And, Jesus says, (this is perhaps the most important part) the willingness to start all over again if it doesn't work the first time around. Forgiveness is the essence of Christian community, and living it out with one another – practicing forgiveness with one another – is the most important thing we do together.

It was a strong word we heard, last week. Especially for those of us who may have been hurt by the church, or hurt within the church, at some time during our lives. To be the church is to forgive, and no matter what it takes, that is what Jesus calls us to do through last week's Gospel lesson.

Personally, I found that to be a hard message. And actually, a number of you did as well. I had a couple of people contact me after my mid-week internet devotional, and a couple of others after my sermon, to talk about how they struggle with our Lord's call to radical forgiveness.

If you were one of those people, or if you were thinking on your own that this is pretty hard stuff, you are in good company. Because at the beginning of this week's Gospel lesson we discover that Peter is wrestling with the same concern.

At the beginning of the lesson, Peter approaches Jesus and asks him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Peter understands what Jesus is saying here. And he understands just how hard this will be. So he fashions a question that he probably thinks will impress Jesus. He knows that everyone is expected to forgive once. And someone with a very generous heart might forgive two or three times. But there comes a time when continuing to forgive is foolish. Someone commits the same sin four or five or six times, and receives forgiveness – now we're starting to establish a pattern – and not a good one! So Peter goes it one more, and grabs on to what most Bible researchers would tell us is an important number – a number that connotes fullness. How about if someone sins against me seven times? Should I continue to forgive that person? (Peter's question anticipates an answer in the negative: "Certainly not that many times.")

But if Peter was anticipating that Jesus would clue him in when he has forgiven enough and is off the hook, he is badly mistaken. Jesus refuses to establish a limit to forgiveness. He doesn't send us into this battle with an exit plan. As a matter of fact, he does the exact opposite. He takes this loaded number that Peter floats, and adds to it by another number ten times its size. Not seven, Peter, but seventy and seven. That's how many times you are called to forgive.

Now before we get stuck in the accountant's role, and start imagining that Jesus has established a new standard here, let us realize that Jesus hasn't replaced Peter's generous number with another somewhat more generous number. There is no way to even keep track of 490 attempts to forgive. What Jesus is saying here is that we are called to "forgive our brothers and sisters beyond our ability to keep track. If we are

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 LORD GOD, MERCIFUL
JUDGE, YOU ARE THE
INEXHAUSTIBLE
FOUNTAIN OF
FORGIVENESS. REPLACE
OUR HEARTS OF STONE
WITH HEARTS THAT LOVE
AND ADORE YOU, THAT
WE MAY DELIGHT IN
DOING YOUR WILL,
THROUGH JESUS CHRIST,
OUR SAVIOR AND LORD.
AMEN.**

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keeping track, it is not really forgiveness at all. If we keep count, it is not... forgiveness." ⁱ

In other words, life in Christ is not a life of keeping score. It is a life of being overcome by, and then of becoming committed to, the life-giving and transforming work of forgiveness. I know that runs counter to much that we experience in this world. I know that in every other area of our lives, keeping score plays a large role. Often times you get what you deserve – and there is no such thing as a free lunch. But that is not the case with the faith that we embrace, and this becomes obvious in the parable Jesus tells to Peter and the others.

Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven is like a king who decides to settle accounts with his slaves. One slave is forgiven a debt that he could have never repaid — forgiven simply because the king has mercy on him. But that slave comes upon another who owes him a much smaller sum, and when he won't repay him our slave grabs him around the throat, begins to choke him, and eventually has him thrown into prison. When the king hears of it, he is furious, and throws the first slave in prison, to stay until the debt is paid.

Jesus tells us that the slave owes the king 10,000 talents. ⁱⁱ A talent was the largest denomination of money in Jesus' day. It was worth approximately 6,000 denarii (or about 17 years' worth of wages). 10,000 was the largest number in the ancient Greek language. So the largest denomination of money times the largest number in the Greek language would equal some sixty million denarii (or about 170,000 years' wages). Now remember that the fellow slave owes 100 denarii (about three months' wages), and you begin to get the picture. The first slave owes an amount that he could never have imagined repaying — sixty million denarii — about \$7.7 billion in our day. And he comes across a fellow slave who owes him a comparatively small amount — one hundred denarii — about \$11,000 or \$12,000 in our day. And because he couldn't repay it immediately, he has this fellow slave thrown into prison.

Think about that: who among us, if someone gave us \$7.7 billion today, would even remember a debt of \$12,000 tomorrow, much less bother to do anything about it? Yet that is what this slave does. And that is the behavior that Jesus warns his disciples against.

You see the problem is this: that slave is so trapped in his greedy, self centered ways – so focused on keeping track what was his – that the gracious forgiveness the king offers him can't touch his heart. He walks out of the courtroom possibly feeling lucky, or clever — but certainly not thankful. When his actions give away the condition of his heart, the king realizes that his gift has done no good. And so it is taken away.

That, by the way, is why this parable is an answer to Peter's question. You remember the question, don't you? That's how the Gospel begins. Peter wants to know how many times he has to forgive a brother or sister. And Jesus replies, in effect, "Peter, if you have to ask how many times, your heart hasn't been touched yet. If you have to ask how much forgiveness you need to share with others, then you really don't understand how much of a gift God has given to you."

So that's what Jesus is really after here. He isn't trying to legislate a higher forgiveness quota — in responding to Peter's question he actually refuses to do that. But he wants the disciples' hearts to be changed. He is trying to get Peter and the others to see what a great gift God is sharing with them. And as Peter and the others continue to misunderstand, Jesus keeps trying, he keeps loving, he keeps hoping that they will catch on. Time and time again, with parables and with sayings and with miracles, Jesus tries to help his disciples see what a gift God is giving them.

This is not easy stuff. We are hard-wired to keep track. We are drawn to clear limits and expectations. Even when we don't try, we are sub-consciously aware of who owes what to whom. But, as Jesus says elsewhere: we must die to our old life. We must die to getting even. We must die to keeping track. We must die to the idea of everyone getting what they deserve. Only in that kind of a death, is there a life worth living.

Amen.

David J. Risendal, Pastor (September 13, 2008)

English Text: ⁱⁱⁱ

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." ^{iv}

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 οὐρανοῦ ἀνθρώπῳ βασιλεῖ, ὃς ἠθέλησεν συναῖραι λόγον μετὰ τῶν δούλων αὐτοῦ. ²⁴ ἀρξαμένου δὲ αὐτοῦ συναίρειν προσῆνέθη 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 ἔξελθὼν 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 ἠθέλην 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. ³² τότε προσκαλεσάμενος αὐτὸν ὁ κύριος αὐτοῦ λέγει αὐτῷ· δούλε πονηρέ, πᾶσαν τὴν ὀφειλὴν ἐκείνην ἀφήκα σοι, ἐπεὶ παρεκάλεσας με· ³³ οὐκ ἔδει καὶ σὲ ἐλεῆσαι τὸν σύνδουλον σου, ὡς καγὼ σὲ ἠλέησα; ³⁴ καὶ ὀργισθεὶς ὁ κύριος αὐτοῦ παρέδωκεν αὐτὸν τοῖς βασανισταῖς ἕως οὗ ἀποδοῦναι πᾶν τὸ ὀφειλόμενον. ³⁵ οὕτως καὶ ὁ πατήρ μου ὁ οὐράνιος ποιήσει ὑμῖν, ἐὰν μὴ ἀφήτε ἕκαστος τῷ ἀδελφῷ αὐτοῦ ἀπὸ τῶν καρδιῶν ὑμῶν. ^v

ⁱ Clay Schmit, Arthur DeKruyter/Christ Church Oak Brook Associate Professor of Preaching at Fuller Theological Seminary (Pasadena, CA), quoted from www.workingpreacher.org.

ⁱⁱ When attempting to value a talent, there are a variety of different estimates. According to www.historicjesus.com: "a talent was not a coin, but a unit of a high value, though the amount varied from time to time. If a denarius was worth a day's wages, a talent would have been worth about seventeen years' wages. A reference to a large number of talents generally meant 'a great deal of money,' much the same as when people today say, 'if I had a million dollars.' "

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

^{iv} 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).

^v 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).