

11.5.2023 Trinity 22 (St. Matthew 18:21-35)

When Peter asked our Lord, *“How oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times?”* Jesus replied, *“I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven”* (Matthew 18:21-22). Jesus then told a parable that vividly illustrates the eternal importance of forgiveness. The Parable of the Unforgiving servant is a story about a servant who owes his king 10,000 talents, a number so large that biblical commentators refer to it as an amount too great to be calculated. This is a debt no person could ever repay, and yet, when the servant falls to the ground and pleads for his lord to have patience with him, the king is so moved with compassion that he forgives the debt entirely.

However, tragically, the same servant, after being forgiven of such a debt, went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him 100 pence, the equivalent of 100 days wages. Now, it’s important to note the fact that this is no small debt. The servant owed his fellow servant 100 days wages. We can understand a debt that significant would be difficult to forgive, but from an objective standpoint, compared to the debt for which he’d just been forgiven, it is absolutely nothing.

Nevertheless, the servant who was forgiven by his lord, refused to follow the example set by his lord and forgive his fellow servant. Instead, he had him put in prison until he would pay the debt in full, and when the king was told of all that had transpired, he said to his unforgiving servant, *“You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you? And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him,”* and the parable concludes with Jesus proclaiming this dire warning, *“So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses”* (Matthew 18:32-35).

We are all intimately aware of how difficult it is to truly forgive, especially when we feel the debt owed to us is significant, but this parable points out the grave error in exercising what we believe is our right to withhold forgiveness. In the example of the unforgiving servant we see that when we insist on

getting what is coming to us, we get what is coming to us. The unforgiving servant used the law, he had his fellow servant put in prison to ensure this man would pay in full for his transgressions, and by doing so, he found himself bound to the same law, and was himself cast in prison until he paid all that was due.

The same principle is found in the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus told His disciples, *“Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you”* (Matthew 7:1-2). When we hold others to a particular standard, God holds us to the same standard, and therefore when we insist on getting what is coming to us, we get what is coming to us, but the good news is that when we extend to others the same grace and mercy and forgiveness that God has lavished upon us, we receive grace and mercy and forgiveness more and more.

Truly forgiving those who’ve injured us is difficult, especially when it’s no small debt, but knowing that we’ve been forgiven of a debt we could never repay, should make us quick to forgive a debt of any amount. God calls us to reach out to others in love and to forgive, because He has reached out to us with His Divine love and abundant forgiveness. Holy Scripture declares the truth that *“while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us”* (Romans 5:8), from the Cross Jesus prayed for those who mocked and crucified Him, *“Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do”* (Luke 23:34), and now our Lord calls His people to extend such grace and mercy and forgiveness to one another.

This call is difficult to hear, and even more challenging to put into practice, but by the grace of God it is possible to forgive, even our enemies and persecutors, from the heart. By the grace of God it is possible to love one another just as Christ has loved us (John 13:34). As evidence of that fact, I’d ask you to consider words written by Corrie ten Boom, a woman who worked with the Dutch Resistance during the Nazi occupation of Holland, a woman whose family home became known as “The Hiding Place” because hundreds of Jews and refugees found shelter there in 1943-44, a woman whose father and sister both died while imprisoned by the Nazis, and who escaped the gas chamber due to a clerical error.

In *The Hiding Place*, Corrie ten Boom wrote these words:

It was in a church in Munich that I saw him, a balding heavysset man in a gray overcoat, a brown felt hat clutched between his hands. People were filing out of the basement room where I had just spoken, moving along the rows of wooden chairs to the door at the rear. It was 1947 and I had come from Holland to defeated Germany with the message that God forgives. It was the truth they needed most to hear in that bitter, bombed-out land, and I gave them my favorite mental picture. Maybe because the sea is never far from a Hollander's mind, I liked to think that that's where forgiven sins were thrown. "When we confess our sins," I said, "God casts them into the deepest ocean, gone forever." The solemn faces stared back at me, not quite daring to believe.

There were never questions after a talk in Germany in 1947. People stood up in silence, in silence collected their wraps, in silence left the room. And that's when I saw him, working his way forward against the others. One moment I saw the overcoat and the brown hat; the next, a blue uniform and a visored cap with its skull and crossbones. It came back with a rush: the huge room with its harsh overhead lights, the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the center of the floor, the shame of walking naked past this man. I could see my sister's frail form ahead of me, ribs sharp beneath the parchment skin. Betsie, how thin you were! Betsie and I had been arrested for concealing Jews in our home during the Nazi occupation of Holland; this man had been a guard at Ravensbrück concentration camp where we were sent. Now he was in front of me, hand thrust out: "A fine message, fräulein! How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!" And I, who had spoken so glibly of forgiveness, fumbled in my pocketbook rather than take that hand. He would not remember me, of course—how could he remember one prisoner among those thousands of women? But I remembered him and the leather crop swinging from his belt. It was the first time since my release that I had been face to face with one of my captors and my blood seemed to freeze. "You mentioned Ravensbrück in your talk," he was saying. "I was a guard in there." No, he did not remember me. "But since that time," he went on, "I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Fräulein"—again the hand came out—"will you forgive me?" And I stood

there—I whose sins had every day to be forgiven—and could not. Betsie had died in that place—could he erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking? It could not have been many seconds that he stood there, hand held out, but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do. For I had to do it—I knew that. The message that God forgives has a prior condition: that we forgive those who have injured us. *“If you do not forgive men their trespasses,”* Jesus says, *“neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses.”* I knew it not only as a commandment of God, but as a daily experience. Since the end of the war I had had a home in Holland for victims of Nazi brutality. Those who were able to forgive their former enemies were able also to return to the outside world and rebuild their lives, no matter what the physical scars. Those who nursed their bitterness remained invalids. It was as simple and as horrible as that. And still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion—I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. “Jesus, help me!” I prayed silently. “I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling.” And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes. “I forgive you, brother!” I cried. “With all my heart!” For a long moment we grasped each other’s hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God’s love so intensely as I did then (Corrie ten Boom, *The Hiding Place*).

Every day we confess our sins, and every day, *until seventy times seven*, God stands ready to forgive, but as Corrie ten Boom pointed out, we must remember God’s forgiveness has a prior condition: that we forgive those who have injured us. *“If you do not forgive men their trespasses,”* Jesus says, *“neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses,”* or as Jesus declared at the conclusion of the parable we read this morning, *“So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses.”* The point is: God has not given us what we deserve, but instead, in Divine love He has extended to us grace, mercy, and forgiveness. Therefore, may we, as children of our Father, disciples of His Son, and temples of His Holy Spirit, extend the same grace, mercy, and

forgiveness to the world He died to save.