

The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost  
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Genesis 50:15-21; Psalm 103:1-13; Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35

Grace and peace to you from God who is, who was, and who is to come.

I find that forgiveness does not come easily.

I find myself to be a harsh and unforgiving person ~ at least, where \*I\* am concerned. I have a difficult time forgiving myself of all the dumb, stupid, idiotic, and whatever other adjectives one may wish to put in there about the things I have done. I can easily tell you of infractions I committed years, even decades, ago. Sometimes I fear I have too much in common with Martin Luther. He would spend hours in confession, trying to name every last sin he had ever done since his last confession, only to almost immediately return, having remembered something else.

I don't really think I'm THAT bad; yet, I can readily name many of the ways I have wronged my spouse. I am able to list fairly quickly, all the women I wronged twenty years ago when I was single and dating. I can list many of the times I gave a less than friendly fingered wave at some, ah, shall we say, "fellow driver" who cut me off, or did some other stupid traffic offense that angered me.

Now please don't get me wrong. If any of YOU came to me, seeking forgiveness of some wrong you have committed, that would be a WHOLE different story, because, it's pretty much common sense to me that we are humans beings: we are imperfect; and we're sinful; and we mess up; we make mistakes. I would try very heartily to make you understand that. I just don't deal all that well with forgiving MYSELF.

But then again, in talking about forgiving others, perhaps, you, like I, in the last couple of weeks, looking at the folks down in New Orleans (and thinking of forgiveness), I understand ~ NOW, two weeks after the fact ~ why not everybody evacuated from New Orleans. Some of them just didn't have the means: they didn't have a vehicle, there was no form of public transportation. Others weren't able to leave for physical or medical reasons; they were, nearly literally, tied to their home. They were just not able to leave. And I can understand, readily, why those folk who got left, or couldn't leave, needed food. I can understand why those folk did what they did, and don't really have a problem with those who broke into grocery stores to get food and sustenance for themselves and the others folk who were left behind. It's the folk who broke into jewelry stores; it's the folk seen walking down the streets carrying televisions, and electronics; it's the folk who broke into Wal-Mart and wiped out the entire gun and ammunition section ~ those are the people with whom I personally struggle about the whole concept of Forgiveness

Then again, maybe it's rather easy for me to be judgmental. I got up this morning and took a shower, a HOT shower, in my bathroom. I dried off with a nice, clean towel. I stood at my sink and shaved and brushed my teeth. I opened the door to my closet and had to choose which black pair of pants and which black shirt I was going wear this morning. I went downstairs to MY kitchen (which, by the way, is NOT flooded, but is up on a hill, so that if my kitchen DOES flood, we are ALL in a boatload of trouble), I stood there in my kitchen, I opened my refrigerator to get out my nice cold Mountain Dew. It's easy for me to be judgmental when I have not been in that kind of a life threatening situation, that went on for several days. Now, I'd like to hope that I would react differently; but I honestly don't know.

Forgiveness, literally “letting go,” is a concept that our early church struggled with. Paul talks about it, as we heard in the letter to the Romans. In that letter, the Jewish believers and the Gentile believers are all butting heads. They are just not getting along with each other. Some of them are still trying to follow the dietary laws laid down hundreds of years previously. Others are eating whatever they can get their hands on: “Hey! There’s a big festival down at the temple of Diana. Let’s go! They’re having lobster and pork! All right!” Others didn’t want to do that, because it went against those dietary restrictions.

There were some who felt there was a certain day to worship: “We’ve always worshiped on this is the day of the week. This is the day we worship.” Others said, why that day? Why can’t we worship on this day? What makes THAT day better than any other day?”

Paul knows what’s going on. Paul tries to be Rodney King: “Why can’t we all just get along?” Paul writes to them: “Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another?” Verse 4. “It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.”

These are the basics, Paul reminds them; the basics are there. Regardless of what you eat, regardless of when you worship, “We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves.”<sup>8</sup> If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s (Romans 14:7-8)

What happens when we don’t forgive? What happens when we let that anger, that bile, that hate, build up inside of us? Can it honestly be doing us any good?

Michael Henderson, in a journal called *The Way* (“Forgiveness: A dilemma of democracy,” *The Way*, January 2004, Michaelhenderson.org.uk.) wrote about a World War II French woman named Irène Laure. She attended the 1947 conference on reconciliation in Switzerland.

“She had been in the Resistance when the Germans occupied her country during World War II. Her son had been tortured, her comrades executed. At the end of the war she had wanted Germany wiped from the face of the earth. She became a member of parliament and leader of the Socialist women. She was invited to the Swiss conference and was horrified to find Germans there.

“She was challenged with the question: How can you rebuild Europe without the Germans? She retired to her room and for several days and nights thought about whether she would give up her hatred for the sake of the new Europe. When she came out, she asked if she could speak. She did so.

She turned to the Germans in the hall and said, “Please forgive me for my hatred.”

“A German woman came up from the hall and took her hand. Irène said it felt like 100 kilos being lifted from her shoulders. She went to Germany and repeated her apology, and everywhere she went Germans were willing, as a result, to face up to their past for the first time.

“In hatred, Laure came to believe, there were always the seeds of a future war.”

Our other two lessons this morning spoke of forgiveness as well. Matthew’s account was pretty blatant: “How many times do I forgive?” (Matthew 18:21) Genesis takes a little more digging, a bit more background, to find out how Joseph and his brothers didn’t get along – but if you don’t know the story (and if you don’t, I’d highly recommend reading it – it’s truly a page turner, starting in Genesis 37 – it’s better than “The Da Vinci Code”), here’s a brief synopsis of Joseph: Joseph’s this arrogant guy, ticks off his brothers; they try to kill him, and after a decade of separation, when they are reunited (although they don’t realize it), Joseph holds their very lives in

his hands. Instead of bringing about retribution, he does this really bizarre thing: he forgives them.

Perhaps this is the weekend, more so than any others, that we need to talk about forgiveness and healing. Perhaps we need to talk about the way that hate, that anger, that despair, can eat away at our insides. Perhaps as well, we need to be reminded, this weekend more so than most, that perhaps Irène Laure, who learned to forgive, and who learned to ASK for forgiveness, so that we can learn how to, like Joseph, learned to respond not with hatred or anger or retribution, but to respond with love. So that we can remember the words of Paul "If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. (Rom 14:8)

This weekend, this weekend especially, let us go forth as witnesses, not of retribution, not of anger, or hate, but as witnesses of God's grace, of God's forgiveness. So that we, like Irene Laure, might fulfill those words of Paul and bring those words of God, that witness of Christ, to those around us, to those in need so that, in all that we do, at home or afar, together we may be that body of Christ here on earth.

Amen.

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