

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 our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Here are some things I've heard in the news recently: "It's not my fault." "I didn't know about it." "It wasn't my responsibility to make that decision." "There were extenuating circumstances." "We didn't know the extent of the damage." These are things the people of the Gulf Coast and we have heard and probably will hear for several months to come. As soon as the hurricane passed, and the scale of the damage was plastered all over our TV screens, the finger-pointing began. It seemed that each agency in turn pointed the finger at another until it seemed that all anyone was doing was blaming instead of moving. The mayor of New Orleans finally couldn't take it any more; he demanded that the press conferences stop and someone do something. He was not alone. There were many who called for action instead of talk.

And now that the evacuations have taken place, and the streets are beginning to dry, the questions still keep piling up. Who failed? Who is to blame? These are questions we all ask in the wake of something like this disaster. I think we ask because of our fear of chaos. "Chaos" means that anything can happen. It means that we are not in control. It means that something like this might happen to us.

During and after the hurricane there was plenty of chaos. But if we could just find the right person to blame, some fault to attribute to someone, then we would be able to say, "If only this or that had been done right, or had been done more quickly, this disaster would not have been so bad." And this implies that by placing blame, we can take back control of the chaos.

Don't get me wrong. There are a lot of things that went wrong before and after the hurricane – things that should not have happened and things that should have happened more quickly. But there are also things, like hurricanes, that are not in anyone's control, and no amount of finger-pointing or placing blame can change that.

Forgiveness will not come easy to those who are living in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, just as forgiveness does not often come easy for any of us. In today's gospel, Peter asks Jesus a question about forgiveness: How often do I forgive a brother or sister – seven times? But this raises a question for me about what Peter asks. If you keep track of how many times you forgive someone, is that really forgiveness? Even the Greek word Peter uses for "forgive" means to "let go" or to "dismiss". But if Peter wants to keep count, how can he be letting go?

The forgiveness we are called to give is the forgiveness that we were first given by God. In the Old Testament we have all read, "God will remember our sin no more". Our sins are truly let go. They are gone the moment forgiveness occurs. When we refuse to forgive, we also refuse to let go of another's sin and this forgiveness that we have been given is not shared with others. Because we are completely forgiven by God, we must also forgive completely.

Jesus' answer to Peter's question turns the idea of limited forgiveness on its head. Jesus says forgive seventy-seven times or even seven times seventy times. Now I don't think Jesus means that we should

keep a little book with us and write down every time we forgive up to 490 and then BAM... I don't think that's the idea. So in answer Jesus says to Peter, "Let me tell you a story ...". (Can't you just hear Peter thinking, "Oh no – not another story. I never get his stories!")

The story Jesus tells has to do with great wealth and great forgiveness. The Bible uses the word "talents" for money, so it can be a little bit hard to grasp the amounts involved, but 10,000 talents is about fifteen years pay. That's a lot of money. The huge size of the debt tells us two things about the slave: First, he's not an ordinary slave. He's a trusted officer in the court of the king. And second, this man has lost a lot of money, and he is in really big trouble. Imagine going to your boss and saying, "You know that \$150,000 you entrusted me to invest for the company? Well, I think I lost it." I don't think any boss would care to hear that.

This slave does not deserve mercy for such poor management of the king's money, but he begs for mercy anyway and makes an impossible promise that he will repay this debt. The king is so moved that he forgives the entire debt. Amazing.

After receiving this amazing mercy and forgiveness for a debt he could never repay, the slave meets up with another member of the court, a fellow slave who owes him money. Again we have another unfamiliar word for money, but a denarius is about a day's pay, so this person owes the first slave about one hundred day's pay. Not an inconsiderable sum, but something that is possible to repay. So what happens when these men meet? Does the first slave show the same mercy and forgiveness that he received from the king? No. He grabs the man who owes him money by the throat, demands payment, and has him thrown into prison until he can pay. When the king hears what has happened, he calls back the first slave and revokes his mercy, reinstates the debt, and sentences the slave to be tortured.

Now, what could Jesus possibly be trying to tell Peter with this story? What is the point here? What jumps out at me is the large amount of the debt and the large amount of forgiveness the first slave receives, and the comparably tiny amount of the debt which he refuses to forgive his fellow slave. The first man could never pay back his debt, while the second man could have. Now what if we look at these two debts in light of what Jesus had said several chapters earlier in Matthew, when he was teaching us how to pray and said "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors". Is it possible that our debt is as large as that of the first slave?

If we look around ourselves on any given day, or read the newspaper, or watch the television, we see that the poor go hungry while greed is rewarded; in fact it's even encouraged. If we look at relationships between family members, family bonds are broken over trivial disagreements. It is all too evident that we don't love God with our whole hearts, and we don't always love our neighbors as ourselves.

Now looking back at the finger-pointing I was talking about at the beginning, one of the most striking things I see is that although everyone seems to agree mistakes were made, no one wants to admit to having made any of those mistakes themselves. Accepting responsibility for something we have done, or have not done, is very hard. It means admitting that we are not perfect, that we are not always in control. We do live in a sinful and broken world.

My home congregation pastor was kind of a funny guy who liked to tell us jokes, and this one has always stayed with me; he used to say, "I can't even get out of the parking lot on Sunday morning without sinning at least once". I can definitely identify with that. Sinning comes too easy. But accepting our sinfulness can

be much harder. We must admit that we are truly sinners and cannot repay the sins that we have committed. We don't deserve God's grace, but we ask for forgiveness anyway. And we are forgiven. Amazing. And that was Jesus' point in telling this parable.

Just like the first slave, we have an unpayable debt, and we don't deserve forgiveness. But God does forgive us, even while we are still sinners. God does love us, even when we make mistakes. Jesus' life among us, teaching us how to love one another, His death on the cross and the resurrection from the dead is evidence of that love. And because we have been forgiven, we must forgive.

I know it's hard to forgive someone when they have hurt us. I, for one, want retribution, not to give forgiveness. We want to do what that slave in the parable did – punish the one who has sinned against us. But we are called to forgive.

For me forgiveness is more like a dance than anything else. The person who has hurt me and I dance together, moving from hurt and pain to forgiveness and love for one another. This is the dance that Jesus taught us when He lived among us, teaching us to love and care for one another, asking forgiveness – even for those who crucified him. Now sometimes I forget the steps to this dance, and I start to trip over my own feet. I concentrate more and more on my own hurt, my confusion; I start looking only at myself. And then I am reminded, especially when we pray the prayer of confession and forgiveness, every Sunday morning, right here, I am also forgiven. I stop concentrating on myself. I look up and I see in the face of my dance partner, the one who has hurt me so badly, the eyes of Jesus smiling back at me, reminding me to forgive as I have been forgiven.

Jesus' parable reminds us of the free gift of God's grace and forgiveness given to all. Having been given this wonderful gift, how can we keep it to ourselves?

Please pray with me: As we gather here today Lord, refreshed at your table and reminded of your abundant love for all humanity, help us to forgive others as you have first forgiven us. Amen.