

## Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 13, 2020

Psalms 103:1-12 (NIV) <sup>1</sup>Praise the LORD, O my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. <sup>2</sup>Praise the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits-- <sup>3</sup>who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, <sup>4</sup>who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion, <sup>5</sup>who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's. <sup>6</sup>The LORD works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed. <sup>7</sup>He made known his ways to Moses, his deeds to the people of Israel: <sup>8</sup>The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. <sup>9</sup>He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; <sup>10</sup>he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. <sup>11</sup>For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; <sup>12</sup>as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.

Genesis 50:15-21 (NIV) <sup>15</sup>When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?" <sup>16</sup>So they sent word to Joseph, saying, "Your father left these instructions before he died: <sup>17</sup>'This is what you are to say to Joseph: I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.' Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father." When their message came to him, Joseph wept. <sup>18</sup>His brothers then came and threw themselves down before him. "We are your slaves," they said. <sup>19</sup>But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? <sup>20</sup>You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. <sup>21</sup>So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children." And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them.

Romans 14:1-12 (NIV) <sup>1</sup>Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters. <sup>2</sup>One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. <sup>3</sup>The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him. <sup>4</sup>Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand. <sup>5</sup>One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. <sup>6</sup>He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. <sup>7</sup>For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. <sup>8</sup>If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. <sup>9</sup>For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living. <sup>10</sup>You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. <sup>11</sup>It is written: "'As surely as I live,' says the Lord, 'every knee will bow before me; every tongue will confess to God.'" <sup>12</sup>So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.

Matthew 18:21-35 (NIV) <sup>21</sup>Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" <sup>22</sup>Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. <sup>23</sup>"Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. <sup>24</sup>As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. <sup>25</sup>Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. <sup>26</sup>"The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be

patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' <sup>27</sup>The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. <sup>28</sup>*"But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. <sup>29</sup>"His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' <sup>30</sup>"But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. <sup>31</sup>When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. <sup>32</sup>Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. <sup>33</sup>Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' <sup>34</sup>In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. <sup>35</sup>"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."*

### ***The Forgiveness of the Kingdom***

Matthew 18:21-35

- ❖ **No limit?** (verses 21-22; 1 Corinthians 13:5)
- ❖ **Incredible debt** (verses 23-26)
- ❖ **Compassionate forgiveness**  
(verse 27; Psalm 103:12; Micah 7:19)
- ❖ **Tormenting unforgiveness** (verses 28-33)
- ❖ **The heart of the matter**  
(verse 35; Luke 6:45; Ephesians 4:32; Matthew 5:7)

Benediction: 1 Timothy 1:15-17

### ***The Forgiveness of the Kingdom***

Matthew 18:21-35

In June 2015, racial tensions in Charleston, South Carolina, were simmering—not unlike they are today across our country. Two months earlier, in a scenario that has become tragically all too common, an unarmed black man, was fatally shot by a white North Charleston police officer. In early June he was indicted by a grand jury for murder. Then on June 17, a 21-year-old white man, walked into the historic Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. He had driven 100 miles to attend a Bible study. Dylan Roof had been there before, casing the church and making his plans. The congregation had been at the epicenter of the black struggle for freedom and racial justice for nearly 200 years. The senior pastor was also an influential state senator. Roof's intent was nothing short of igniting a race war. At the end of the study he pulled out a gun and started shooting the 12 people gathered in the small room, including the senior pastor, for no other reason than that they were black. Tragically, only three survived including an 11-year-old girl.

The people of Charleston did not respond with violence and looting. The families of the slaughtered set the example, and responded with forgiveness.

Only a few days after the murders, family members of the victims were permitted to speak directly to the killer, at his court appearance, through closed circuit television.

What they said was incredible. Among those who spoke was Nadine. Looking directly at the man who killed her mother she said: "You took something very precious away from me. I will never get to talk to her ever again. I will never be able to hold her again. But I forgive you."

Anthony, a relative of another victim, said, "I forgive you and my family forgives you, but we would like you

to take this opportunity to repent. Give your life to the one who matters the most—Jesus Christ—so He can change it.

Conservative columnist, Jonah Goldberg, writing in the *National Review* confessed: “Not being a Christian, I can only marvel at the dignity and courage of the victims’ relatives who forgave the shooter. If I could ever manage such a thing, it would probably take me decades. It took them little more than a day.”

Forgiveness isn’t easy. Sometimes it is the most difficult thing in the world.

At the same time, forgiveness which leads to reconciliation is the most needed thing in the world. Reconciliation is the missing element in so many relationships in our blame-infused culture, and in a world bent on retaliation.

But our text today is not talking about the world (although other Scriptures certainly relate it to that sphere); it is, as we heard last week, speaking about reconciliation within the church, the family of faith; reconciliation between our brothers and sisters in Christ. And that is the context in which the question was put to Jesus:

*<sup>21</sup>Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" <sup>22</sup>Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.*

Was Jesus saying that forgiveness is to be offered with

### **No limit?** (verses 21-22)

That would be a radical departure from established teaching at that time. Jewish Rabbis had set a limit of three times, on the requirement to forgive a person for the same offence. After that, you had no obligation to forgive. Peter thought he was staking out the high ground when he doubled that expectation and rounded it up to the perfect number, 7.

Jesus blows that ship out of the water by responding, *"I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.*

A better translation is seventy times seven! Either way, Jesus is eradicating any limit on forgiveness—and eliminating any tendency to keep score.

As the apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 13, *love keeps no record of wrongs.*

Jesus follows up His answer to Peter with a parable of a servant who incurred an

### **Incredible Debt** (verses 23-27)

*<sup>23</sup>"Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. <sup>24</sup>As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him.*

An audit of the King’s books revealed that one of his servants owed him millions. It’s hard to put a current dollar amount on the *ten thousand talents* he owed. Jesus meant the number to be unfathomable. It is the word myriad, innumerably many, countless. To put the number in some perspective, it was more than 10 times total annual tax revenue collected by the Roman government from Judea, Samaria, and Galilee combined. It was indeed, a king’s ransom.

This servant was hopelessly over his head in debt. There was no possible way of clearing himself.

*<sup>25</sup>Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.*

The man must have broken out in a cold sweat. His whole world going down.

The king ordered the servant’s assets liquidated and his family sold. Those were the bankruptcy statutes of that day.

The man then made a desperate plea:

*26 "The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.'*

It was a ridiculous claim—there was no possibility to make up the loss and to settle his account. And yet, unexpectedly, the king responded with

### **Compassionate forgiveness** (verse 27)

*27 The servant's master [Lord] took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.*

The literal meaning of *canceled the debt* was that it was dismissed and sent away. This is the same verb that is usually translated “to forgive.” It means what Psalm 103:12 proclaims: “*As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.*” And what Micah 7:19 promises, “*and You will cast all their sins into the depths of the sea.*”

I think the NJKV renders this verse best:

*Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt.* (Matthew 18:27 NKJV)

What deliverance! Within an inch of doom, he was saved. At the very edge of the precipice, he was pulled back to safety. The sense of relief in his heart must have been incredible. On a human level receiving forgiveness of this magnitude is a thrilling experience!

And yet, the compassion and kindness of his Lord, the king, was lost on this scoundrel. Having received compassionate forgiveness, his heart was filled with

### **Tormenting unforgiveness** (verses 28-33)

*28 "But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii.*

As soon as he was set free from his prison of debt, he went looking for someone else to lock up; *he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii.* That's about three months wages for a day

laborer. At today's minimum wage, it is around \$6,000, not an inconsequential sum, but in comparison to the hundreds of millions he was released from, it is a trifle.

Without even being civil, as the king was to him, the uncivil servant violently accosted his peer:

*He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. Literally, Pay up!!*

*29 "His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.'*

That should have looked and sounded familiar to the forgiven servant since he had just employed the same posture and words in his own plea for leniency.

His answer was harsh and unyielding:

*30 "But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt.*

The unmerciful servant could see no connection between the compassionate forgiveness he had just been shown, and his duty toward one indebted to him. The king had set the example and he failed to appreciate it. He had taken the king's forgiveness for granted—it hadn't registered on his hardened heart. His life had not in the least been moved to change. This proved to be a fatal mistake.

*31 When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened.<sup>32</sup> "Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. <sup>33</sup>Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?'*

The key phrase here is in verse 33: *Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?'* The word, *shouldn't*, wasn't meant as a suggestion. According to the *Exegetical Dictionary of the New*

*Testament* this word “designates an unconditional necessity.” That is to say, the verse is better translated, *wasn't it necessary for you to have had mercy on your fellow servant.*

The mercy of the king did not simply suggest that the one shown mercy should be merciful to others, but demanded it.

The magnanimous compassion of the king then turned to righteous and just anger: <sup>34</sup>*In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.*

Unforgiveness leaves a person tortured, whether they are thrown in a literal prison or not.

To illustrate this, allow me to quote from an article I read some years ago, I believe in *Discipleship Journal*. The author, whose name I've lost, wrote concerning the prison which is unforgiveness.

This truth was vividly presented to me some years ago when I was struggling as a new Christian to build a healthy relationship with my father. Like most teenagers, with parents who are bound to be imperfect, I had a number of resentments toward my father for things he had done, and things he had failed to do. As I sought to repair some flawed aspects of my own life, I came up against a terrible realization: Much of my own brokenness was rooted in my alienation from Dad.

I cried out to God, as I had for years before, that I was a helpless victim: It was my father's fault, I said, that I was suffering from rejection, from a poor self-image, from old wounds in my spirit that bled all over my present relationships with almost everyone I knew. Until Dad changed, I had no power, it seemed, to heal the breach between us and move toward wholeness.

In that miserable state of mind, I wept alone in my

room one night, protesting the Lord's unfairness. But as I prayed, a picture formed slowly in my imagination. I saw an image of a dungeon, with my father standing sadly behind the bars of one cell, and myself cowering in the corner of the one next door. Nevertheless, in my hand was a key; and I could hear the Lord saying, “You have the power to set the captives free. Forgive as you have been forgiven.”

I had no idea at the time that forgiveness meant release; I had never studied the word, nor even read the parable of the unmerciful servant. Yet in that moment, I finally realized that by God's grace I could be, not a victim, but a liberator. Jesus' prior cancelling of my own debts meant that I could afford to release my father from his. So, by an act of my will [and I should add by the power of God's grace], I forgave Dad—immediately, aloud in my room, and specifically for every offense I could remember. Then I asked God to forgive *me* for my bitterness—and I, too, was set free.

The prison of unforgiveness tortures the one who shows no mercy, who extends no forgiveness. As long as we continue to blame, rather than release the one who offended us, we are locked into the tortures Jesus spoke of in this parable.

It is a warning to those who show no mercy, and in this warning, Jesus exposes

### **The heart of the matter** (verse 35)

<sup>35</sup>*"This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."*

Jesus put his finger on the heart of the matter in speaking of the heart. Jesus said in Luke 6:45 *The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil . . .* (ESV)

The question is, what is in your heart?

If your heart is filled with anger, jealousy and strife, then forgiveness will be impossible.

If your heart is filled with mercy, love and peace, then by God's grace, forgiveness will flow from your life.

It is evident that in the case of the unmerciful servant (as he is often called) his heart was unchanged by the mercy shown him by the King.

All of the anger, entitlement, and malice came out when he encountered the one indebted to him.

We are admonished in Ephesians 4:32, *Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.* (NASB)

There is a blessing in forgiveness as Jesus promised in Matthew 5:7 *Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.* (ESV)

If God's compassionate forgiveness, extended to us in Jesus Christ, is not received into our hearts—if it does not change us, so our hearts are still hardened toward others, then we will continue to live in a prison of unforgiveness.

If we, like the unmerciful servant, still demand justice from others, then we have not understood the unfathomable grace and mercy which has been extended to us. We have not comprehended that God's justice was fully met in Jesus' suffering and death—and since justice has been fulfilled by Christ, we cannot demand it from anyone else.

Do you resist Jesus command to give **unlimited forgiveness**, thinking that your cause is so just that you can withhold it from another?

Have you clearly understood the **incredible debt** you've incurred by your sin against God? Do you take lightly His **compassionate forgiveness** extended to you by our Lord's suffering and death?

Will you be locked forever in **tormenting unforgiveness**, or will you use the key given you by grace to release both you and your debtor from that prison?

Have you fully understood **the heart of the matter** is the condition of your own heart? Have you, by faith, received Jesus Christ into your heart as your savior and Lord, so He may fill it with His love, joy, peace, patience, kindness and goodness?

*Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.* (Ephesians 4:32 NASB)

That is **the forgiveness of the kingdom!**

Let us pray . . .

Benediction: 1 Timothy 1:15-17

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown **mercy** so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life. **Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.** (NIV)