

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 13, 2020

Pastor Peter Gregory, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Westminster, Massachusetts

Who's Counting?

Matthew 18:21–35

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

Eph 1:2

From the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant: **“Out of pity for him, the master of that servant with the unfathomable debt released him and forgave him the debt”** (v 27).

Jesus said, **“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you’ve gained your brother”** (Mt 18:15). That’s fabulous to have your brother back, of course, and hopefully it goes well from there on out, but . . . what happens if he sins against you a second time? Or a third? Fool me once, right? How many times must I forgive my brother or sister or whoever it is that has sinned against me?

3.

With all Jesus’ talk of sin and forgiveness, someone was bound to ask this. Okay, *Peter* was bound to ask, but we were all thinking it. He said, **“Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?”** (v 21). No doubt just an academic question, a purely hypothetical scenario, probably asking for a friend. Who are we kidding? Andrew, Peter’s brother, was *right there* when Peter asked. And the whole group of apostles were like a big brotherhood. There’s an edge to this question. It’s a not-so-subtle message for a brother. I wonder: Who was it that Peter struggled to forgive? Whose sins did he have in mind? And isn’t he right to question how sincerely repentant someone is who sins *again* and *again*? Exactly when does forgiveness run out? Here’s how I picture Peter: I picture him with a small stick in one hand and a clay tablet in the other—a tablet with six tally marks already written on it. But you could use a smartphone and an excel spreadsheet. Come to think of it, there’s probably an app for that. That’s NOT a suggestion! And if you’re already using an app or a spreadsheet to keep track of your brother’s sins, come find me after the service.

We’re much better at identifying sin in others than sin in ourselves, especially the sins committed against us. You can see this in children. They’re quick to call out the sins of their siblings but slow to remember that they just did the very same thing. And where’d the kids learn to do that, I wonder? We can name other people’s sins and describe them

in the greatest detail—the place, the day, the time, exactly what she said, exactly what he did. You don't even have to be good at math to enjoy counting your brother's sins.

So, whose sins are you counting? Whose sins are you holding against them, or holding ready to *use* against them as needed? Is it your husband? Wife? Friend? Child? Parent? Coworker? Sibling? Because pulling your neighbor's sins back out of the dustbin can be a great way to win an argument or get what you want or just plain demolish the person. Other people's sins make great weapons in our hands.

We've had it happen to us. We've done it, too. But now we're watching the same thing take place in a much wider way. Suddenly our entire culture seems interested in sin, even if the word is never used. It speaks not only of individual sins but also of corporate sins. It speaks not only of sins in the present but also sins of the past. Our world has suddenly discovered the height and depth and width and breadth of sin. And it's terribly disheartening. Sin is so pervasive, so complex, so woven into our ways of life and being, that there's no quick fix or easy answer. So stores burn, statues topple, friends and family divide, and people die as everyone struggles to figure out what to do. If you, O people, mark iniquities, who can stand?

The world knows all about sin. It knows well how to cancel sinners. But it knows absolutely nothing about forgiveness. How different the kingdoms of this world are from the kingdom of heaven!

As the Psalmist says, **“If You, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But with You there is forgiveness, that You may be feared”** (Ps 130:3–4).

Who's counting? Who's keeping track? Who's numbering the sins of the world? Not Jesus. His cross cancels all counting of sins. It doesn't just wipe the slate clean. It obliterates the slate. It deletes the app. It takes out the entire operating system. For how does one compare the sins of the world, as great as they are, to infinity? How far is the east from the west? The blood of God is immeasurable. There's no way to quantify our Lord's forgiveness. It can't be put into numbers. Its value is infinite, while our sins are finite. How do you handle that in an accounting system?

So Jesus answers Peter's question about forgiving his brother by saying, **“I tell you not seven times, but seventy times seven”** (v 22). To Jesus, the question doesn't even make sense. The limits of forgiveness? What do you mean? That's like asking how big infinity is! Counting sins and forgiving them come from two totally different kingdoms, two different worlds.

2.

Then Jesus tells the parable we heard—the Parable of the Unmerciful Servant which is really the Parable of the Unfathomably Forgiving master. When the world is on a hunt to destroy sinners, Jesus comes and speaks to us of forgiveness—forgiveness undeserved, forgiveness unlimited. He calls us to a deeper appreciation of the height and depth and width and breadth of forgiveness. Through the parable, Jesus invites us to see forgiveness as something more than a mere moment of time. Forgiveness extends throughout an entire kingdom. It creates the relationship you have with your master, but it also shapes the relationship you have with others and the life you lead in His kingdom.

Jesus said, “Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt” (vv 23–27).

The servant asks for patience. He promises to work hard to pay back his debt. But the master has a different vision. The master wants to bring him into a new kind of kingdom. Not a kingdom where you pay your debts but a kingdom where your debts are paid. So the master forgives the servant his debt—an unfathomable debt, a debt so huge it could never be repaid. From now on, this servant will live in a kingdom ruled by mercy, where debts are paid by the deep compassion of the master.

Except that’s not what happens. **“When that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay what you owe.’ So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. Then his master summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt” (vv 28–34).**

As soon as he leaves the master’s sight, he enters a world where he believes debts need to be paid. It doesn’t add up! Having come from a kingdom where sins are forgiven, he

refuses to live in that kingdom. For him, forgiveness is a simple transaction, not something in which he lives and moves and meets the neighbor who owes him.

1.

Jesus warns: “**So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart**” (v 35). You can’t live in both kingdoms. You can’t live in the kingdom of God’s unlimited forgiveness *and* in the kingdom where you count your brother’s sins.

We heard the same thing in Genesis between Joseph and his brothers. The brothers think that they’re still living in the kind of kingdom where they’ll have to pay what they owe, while Joseph is in the kingdom of unlimited forgiveness. The brothers plead for forgiveness. They offer their service. They’ll pay what they owe. Instead, Joseph says, “**Am I in the place of God?**” (Gen 50:19). He gives up the right of revenge. “**As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to keep many people alive. So don’t fear; I’ll provide for you and your little ones**” (Gen 50:20–21). Actually, Joseph is acting in the place of God—acting exactly like God when he forgives their sins, comforts them, and speaks kindly to them. He neither counts their sins nor holds their sins against them.

You belong to this kingdom, the kingdom in which Joseph lived, the kingdom ruled by King Jesus, the kingdom of mercy and forgiveness. You haven’t been canceled, but your debt has been.

WHO’S COUNTING NOW? NOT JESUS! NOT YOU!

Your world has changed. As God forgives you because of Christ, He brings you into a kingdom that reaches to the ends of the earth and lasts to the end of time.

When we walk out these doors, I suppose we could go back to the kingdom where we pay our debts and make others pay, too. . . but who would ever want to do that? Dear friends, out of pity, the master has released you and forgiven your debt forever.

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Phil 4:7

Credit for portions of this sermon goes to David Schmitt, “Gospel: Matthew 18:21-35 (Pentecost 15: Series A),” from <https://www.1517.org/articles/gospel-matthew-1821-35-pentecost-15-series-a>, accessed September 10, 2020.