

Sermon, Pastor Mike Button  
Occasion: 14 Pentecost  
Date: September 14, 2014  
Theme: "Forgiven and Freed"  
Text: Matthew 18: 21-35

*NRS Matthew 18*

<sup>21</sup> Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" <sup>22</sup> Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

<sup>23</sup> "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. <sup>24</sup> When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; <sup>25</sup> and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. <sup>26</sup> So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' <sup>27</sup> And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. <sup>28</sup> But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' <sup>29</sup> Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' <sup>30</sup> But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. <sup>31</sup> When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. <sup>32</sup> Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. <sup>33</sup> Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' <sup>34</sup> And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. <sup>35</sup> So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

The Gospel of the Lord.  
Praise to you, O Christ.

Dear Friends in Christ, may the Lord "comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word" (2 Thessalonians 2:17); for the sake of Jesus the Messiah. Amen.

In the ancient rite of the early church, candidates for Baptism were turned around to face east, the direction of light and life and the Rising Son.



With their backs to the west, they then renounced everything that was dark, dying, and opposed to the reign of God. To this day the church wall before which the altar of the Lord stands is always referred to as the East Wall, regardless of how it lines up on a compass. That's because wherever we are and however our churches are configured, Christian faith is always about living toward the New Day, the New Life, the New Way of Jesus Christ.

When Jesus wanted to point people toward the future God has in store for this creation, he lifted before them the Kingdom of God.

(Since Matthew's Gospel was written with special sensitivity to the concerns of Jewish Christians, many of whom were fearful of breaking the Second Commandment,

Matthew often substitutes the word "heaven" for God, but the meaning is the same.) Jesus spoke of the Kingdom as more than heaven, the place we go when we die, but more importantly, Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom as heaven coming to earth, when God's will will be accomplished here just as it is fully done in heaven. The Kingdom is the goal, object, and destiny for all who answer Christ's call to repent and believe in the gospel. Jesus commanded that we are to "strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness" (Matthew 6:25), trusting that God will provide us with everything else we need.



Again, in seeking God's kingdom first, our destination is not so much a place, but a future, a promised time when the reign of God will be supreme and unopposed both in our own hearts and throughout creation.

God promises us a future that will look, feel, and be like Jesus, overcoming death, wiping every tear from every eye, and making us whole and well in a creation made new by God's love. Job One, then, for every believer is to live toward that day "when death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more" (Revelation 21:4). And living toward that future, we are to invest our hearts, souls, and minds in those things that make for peace and justice and whatever else anticipates the coming Kingdom of God.

God has made us to live now the future revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And in order to free us for that future, God liberates us from those past sins and failures that turn us around and hold us back from pursuing the Kingdom. However we may have strayed, messed up, or rebelled against God's call, by the blood of Jesus God forgives us so that we can get back on track and be reconciled to the destiny God intends

for you and me and this whole sin-torn, storm-tossed world of ours. Rather than focus on our past faithlessness and unleash on us the divine wrath we so justly deserve, God instead, says Paul, put forward Jesus "as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith . . . to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had





passed over the sins previously committed” (Romans 3:25). In mercy that cost God the heartbreak of surrendering the only Son into the hands of sinful humanity, God has passed over our deadly and deadening pasts to open before us a future of undying glory.

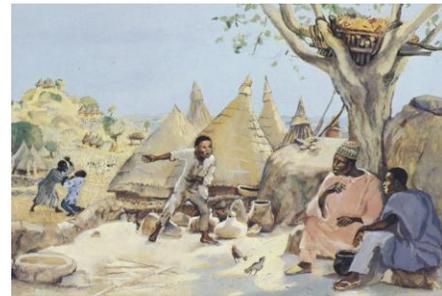
It’s just like in today’s parable. Whether through our foolishness or dishonesty, the simple fact is we owe more than we can ever possibly pay back, and by that debt we have enslaved

ourselves in chains we can never escape. But in a generosity we cannot begin to comprehend, the King wipes the slate clean and sets us on our way. But as the parable also makes clear, that way is not in holding others in the same bondage from which we ourselves have been freed.

We have been liberated to live as heirs of the Kingdom coming to us from God’s future, not as slaves to a past that can only drag us down and bury us in shame. As the unforgiving slave learns to his eternal regret, once we turn our back on the Kingdom, there’s the devil to pay.

In his question to Jesus about how often we are to forgive our sister or brother, Peter makes it sound as though forgiveness is some kind of onerous, unpleasant task forced on us by God’s mercy. I love this quote from Lewis Smedes:

“To forgive is to set a prisoner free and



discover that the prisoner was you.”

Forgiveness, you know, doesn’t mean kissing and making up. It doesn’t mean having to smile and shake hands with the bully who’s just beat you up. Rather, forgiveness is the very power of God given to us for asserting that nothing or no one, past or present, is going to hold us back from the goodness God has promised us.



Forgiven by God, we forgive not just to get stepped on again, but to step forward into God’s future, letting go of an empty past in order to keep moving toward our ultimate home in the Kingdom.

But, of course, here’s the source of so much tragedy and heartbreak for humankind. God has forgiven us to forgive others, and we don’t.

Instead of leaving the past in the past and letting the dead bury the dead, we hang on to the past, holding grudges, nurturing resentments, and plotting vengeance. And even when we say we forgive, we don’t, or not fully, but continue to fume and fester over the sins of others. Please understand me: I have great compassion for the victims of heinous crimes, people who have suffered serious damage to their bodies and souls at the hands of hateful people. Even thirteen years after the terrible events in Pennsylvania, Washington, and Manhattan, I’m still so angry over those vicious attacks. And if some drone happens to strike that maniac who’s now beheaded two of our fellow citizens, I don’t think I’ll be shedding any tears. We all understand how hard it is to overcome a past injury that still

hurts so badly we wonder if we'll ever get past it. That kind of forgiveness requires time and nurture and great patience; that is to say, nothing less than divine intervention and the healing that can only come as an act of God.

But here's what I can't understand. How is it that we so regularly embitter our lives and those around us over the stupidest, silliest, dip kind of stuff that we make into federal cases?

How many people do you know who have shot off perfectly healthy toes and spent years of their lives now limping around and bleeding on everybody else because somebody said something that they didn't like, or that hurt their feelings, or that made them mad? How many times do you play over and over and over again in your mind that time your brother talked bad about your kids, or your



mother forgot your birthday but had a party for your sister, or your boss passed you over for a promotion that you really deserved? After you've been forgiven a lifetime of sins, how often do you go out and grab your debtor by the throat until he or she has paid, and paid, and paid for having wounded your honor, or offended your pride, or just didn't live up to your expectations?

Let me say something you all know. Life is short, eternity is long, and God has called us to waste not a second on futile mind games or silly schemes to get even.

The past is something we can learn from. The past includes the legacy of blessings by which God empowers us to forgive and get over. The past is what God's mercy enables us to let go of and get on with life. But the past is no place to live, not even for a little while, not even a little of you. Only the Kingdom of God is worthy of our total allegiance, and for that future God has forgiven you and me.

