

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 16-17, 2017
Matthew 18:21-35

“Forgiven and Forgiving”

Head vs. heart – that’s what we hear from Jesus in today’s Gospel lesson. Things from the head can be counted and enumerated, but things from the heart are not so easily measured. We spend a great deal of time counting and enumerating things at our jobs and in our lives at home with budget planning, time management, to-do lists, bill paying, etc. But how do we measure things less tangible like joy in our lives, our spirit within, forgiving others? We may do well with counting things from our head, but struggle to do so with things from the heart. We see these two spheres not only in our individual lives, but also in our collective life as a congregation. Churches are often very good at measuring things from the head, as we have to do each year with the dreaded Statistical Report. Each congregation of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod must submit this to the Synod office in St. Louis, and for those who do not, guess who gets to follow up with these stragglers? Yup, yours truly as the Circuit Visitor gets to ding on them. The Statistical Report measures things like average weekly worship attendance, Bible class participation, how many were baptized and confirmed, new members received, etc. We are very good at measuring the 3 B’s: bodies (worship attendance), budgets (offerings and finances), and buildings (operating expenses and new construction). I would equate these with things from the head that can be counted and enumerated. But we are not so good at measuring things that are less tangible in the church: not just our *seating* capacity but our *sending* capacity. That is, how are we doing at sending people out into the community and world to serve in Jesus’ Name? How are we doing with loving our neighbor? How is it going with joining Jesus on his mission? How are we the fruits of the Spirit being shown in our daily life (Galatians 5:22-23)? These things are a lot more challenging to measure, but they are just as important as measuring things like bodies, budgets, and buildings. Forgiveness is at the heart of the kingdom of God, and as we find out in today’s Gospel lesson, it is not so much a matter of the head as it is a matter of the heart. Today we focus on Jesus’ parable of the unforgiving servant under the theme “Forgiven and Forgiving.” May the Lord’s rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus’ sake.

Peter’s question that opens up today’s Gospel lesson is really our question: **“Lord, how often will my brother [or sister] sin against me, and I forgive him [or her]? As many as seven times?”** (Matthew 18:21). How many times have we felt that forgiving *that person* is going nowhere? Surely there must be a limit in how many times I have to forgive my brother or sister? Peter thought he was being more than generous with forgiving up to seven times. Peter is operating up here in his head; he’s counting and enumerating things in the kingdom of God like they are so many heads of lettuce in the produce aisle. We often are prone to do the same. We operate like we’re the ones in charge of God’s kingdom. We’re not the owners, but the managers, of what belongs to God. This is the first principle in Christian stewardship. And one of the chief things that belongs to God is the gift of forgiveness. **“Not seven times, but seventy times seven”** (Matthew 18:22), Jesus tells Peter. No doubt, Peter’s mouth was hanging open when he heard Jesus say this. What?!! Jesus makes clear that forgiveness is not about scorekeeping. It’s not about keeping track of how many we’re up and how many we’re owed. It doesn’t work that way in the kingdom of God. If anybody had a right to bear a grudge, surely it was Joseph who was sold by his brothers in to slavery and taken to Egypt. And yet God used all of this for good and for blessing, as Joseph recognized when he was reconciled to his brothers as we heard in the Old Testament lesson (Genesis 50:15-21). If anyone has the right to keep score, it’s God, not us. And God has graciously and generously wiped the slate clean for you and for me. God has cleared the debt of sin which we owe. Not some of it or part of it, but *all of it*. Every last microscopic particle of that debt of sin has been forgiven through the cleansing blood of Jesus. You and I have done nothing to earn or deserve this; it comes freely as God’s gift in Jesus

to you and to me. Rejoice in this gift, but never take it for granted. And now, what will we do with this great gift?

When I was in college, I was in a one-act play entitled, “Seventy Times Seven Equals 490, but Then, Pow!” The play was all about a couple, Mr. & Mrs. Dexter Q. Plots, who had put up a chalkboard in their living room, which was neatly divided down the middle into two equal sides for “his and hers.” There were hash marks on each side as the couple furiously worked to forgive one another and be the first to reach the magic number of 490. When they got to 490, they reasoned, then they could really get down to business and forget about all this forgiveness nonsense and start getting even – pow! That’s how they were reading Jesus’ words in today’s Gospel lesson. It was a comedy, of course, and pretty funny as I recall. But is there some truth here? When it comes to forgiveness, if we operate up here in our head, rather than here in our heart, we are Peter. We are Mr. & Mrs. Dexter Q. Plotts. Unless our heart is moved to forgive others because of God’s forgiveness for us, no amount of counting or enumerating in our head is going to move us to do this. The motivation to do so must come from God, as we spoke together those words from Psalm 103: **“He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.”**

Jesus’ parable of the unforgiving servant is pretty graphic. If the forgiveness that we ourselves have received from God does not extend from our heart to those around us, then we are in grave danger of incurring the wrath of our King. Otherwise, how can we pray the Fifth Petition in the Lord’s Prayer: **“And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us?”** (Matthew 6:12; Luke 11:2-4). These are not just words that we can mumble thoughtlessly or without searching our heart. It is a matter of utmost seriousness for our life and faith. As Lutheran Christians, when we pray this petition of the Lord’s Prayer we use the word “trespass,” but the better word choice, and one that is more true to the original, is “debt” (ὀφείλημα). Now that’s something we can all understand! Mounting debt in our lives and in our culture is all too real. Does that petition in the Lord’s Prayer hit home more if we would pray, **“And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors?”** Imagine complete debt forgiveness for your student loan! Imagine having mortgage forgiveness if you’re underwater on your mortgage! That would be an amazing gift! And if you were forgiven this indebtedness, would you then forgive someone indebted to you? Jesus calls us to see forgiveness as something not just to be received, but something to be shared.

Forgiveness is God’s gift to the world. Forgiveness from the heart short-circuits our human tendency for revenge and retribution. Over against our desire to get our pound of flesh, God himself tells us, **“Vengeance is mine; I will repay,” says the Lord**” (Deuteronomy 32:35; Romans 12:19). How will the world know of God’s amazing gift of forgiveness in Jesus except it come to them through God’s people who have themselves received this same gift of forgiveness? Forgiveness has both vertical and horizontal dimensions to it. As God in Christ has forgiven us (vertical), so we are now called to forgive one another (horizontal). Not only are we recipients of God’s forgiveness in Jesus, we are also called to be vehicles and instruments of this forgiveness to those around us. One by one, lives are impacted and hearts are touched for the kingdom of God. In Jesus, we are forgiven and forgiving. God help us to do this for Jesus’ sake. Amen.