

Forgiven and Forgiving

(Pent 17C; Luke 17)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord, in whom we have received the forgiveness of our sins. Amen!

In this evening's/morning's Gospel, after our Lord warns the disciples against causing "little ones" to sin, he issues another warning and series of instructions: *"Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him."* The apostles said to the Lord, *"Increase our faith!"* This evening/morning we consider this text and the theme: Forgiven and Forgiving. Let us pray.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen!

There was a news story this week that managed to cut through all of the fog and confusion coming out of DC and shine a light on the theme in our text. It was the story of the younger brother of Botham Jean, a young black man who was shot to death in his living room by a white off-duty police officer named Amber Guyger. This week, after Guyger was found guilty of murder, Jean's younger brother Brandt, directly addressed Guyger, told her that he forgave her, encouraged her to give her life to Christ, and gave her a hug. Needless to say, I don't think there was a dry eye in the courtroom. Now, in light of this evening's/morning's text and theme, I ask you, what moved this young man to extend forgiveness to the woman who shot and killed his older brother? What moves one person to extend that kind of forgiveness

to another person? The short answer, of course, is the gospel of Jesus Christ. Stated in terms of our theme, it is this: we forgive because we've been forgiven. And that is what I want us to explore together this evening/morning.

The first thing we need to do is come to a clear understanding of the text. Verse three begins with a strong warning by our Lord: "*Pay attention to yourselves!*" While this warning no doubt follows from his teaching in vv. 1-2 concerning the danger of tempting "little ones," those new to the faith, to sin; it also marks a clear transition into the theme that we are considering together. Our Lord is saying, "Listen up," what I am telling you is important; it's important *for you*. "*Pay attention to yourselves,*" says our Lord. What Jesus is telling his disciples, what he is telling us, has some profound implications for us. It has profound implications both for our relationship to one another and for our relationship to the Lord. This theme of being forgiven and extending forgiveness lies at the very heart of our faith and life as Christians. So "Pay attention!"

Alright then, pay attention to what? What is of such importance that our Lord issues this kind of warning? The first thing he tells us is this: "*If your brother sins, rebuke him,...*" Now, this kind of thing makes most of us uncomfortable because generally speaking we want people to like us and we don't want to run the risk of offending someone and making them mad at us. But note the familial language here: "*if your brother sins...*" At the end of the day the church is and is called to be a family. We are the household and family of God. As a result of our baptism into Christ Jesus we all have God as our Father, Jesus as our elder brother, and one another as brothers and sisters in him. And thus we are called to have a proper care and

concern for one another. When you and I see a brother or sister pursuing a sinful course or when they sin against us, we are called to “*speak the truth*” (Eph. 5:25) to them. We are called, lovingly, truthfully to call them to repentance. We are called to say to them, “You know what? When you did or said that, it really hurt or offended me.” Or “I know that the path you’re on seems right to you, but here’s what God has to say about it and I’m encouraging you to turn back.”

Now why we do that? Is it because we really want to stick it to them? Is it because we really enjoy shining a light on the faults and misdeeds of our brothers and sisters? If we’re being totally honest, there are doubtless times when those thoughts pass through our minds and maybe even settle into our hearts for a bit, but the real reason that we call our brothers and sisters to repentance is actually to see them come to repentance and experience forgiveness and restoration. Thus the second thing our Lord says in v. 3 is, “*and if he repents, forgive him,...*” The goal of calling attention to one another’s sins when we must do so is so that these sins may be confessed and therefore forgiven. “*Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed,*” says St. James (5:16a). This is what our Smalcald Articles (III, 4) calls “the mutual conversation and consolation of the brethren” through which we proclaim the gospel to one another and receive the forgiveness of sins from one another. That is the goal.

It’s the goal, but it is not necessarily easy. What happens when a brother or sister sins against time after time? Our Lord addresses this question in v. 4: “*and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him.*” Yep, you heard him correctly; even if your brother or

sister, ahem, even if you husband or wife, father or mother, friend or neighbor, pastor or elder, sins against you seven times in the day, if they repent and seek your forgiveness, our Lord says you must forgive them. There's no wiggle room there. He doesn't say, "You should really give it some thought and consider forgiving your brother." No, he says, "*you must forgive him.*" And it's not even as if seven is the magic cut off because on another occasion when our Lord was teaching on this theme, which is recorded in Matthew 18, Peter asks, "*Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I have to forgive him?*" *As many as seven times?*" Jesus said to him, "*I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.*" What does our Lord mean by this? Here's a hint: he doesn't mean that the cut off is 490 times! He means that as often as our brother or sister sins against us, we must be ready and willing to forgive them.

Now, perhaps at this point you're thinking, but you don't know what so and so said or did to me. And you know what? You're right, I don't know, but our Lord does and this is path down which he has called us to walk as his disciples.* As I've said already, that doesn't make it easy. It's hard. And perhaps this explains the only words uttered by the disciples in this morning's Gospel. At the conclusion of our Lord's teaching on this in vv. 1-4, we read this in v. 5, "*The apostles said to the Lord, 'Increase our faith!'*" It seems clear that this request for more or stronger faith flows from the apostles' recognition that they weren't able to do what the Lord was calling them to do in vv. 1-4. The apostles are essentially crying out for help. And ultimately their request is the key that unlocks how God enables us to extend forgiveness to one another. What is faith? Faith is that which believes the promise of God. What has

God promised? He promises many things, but his central promise is that our sins are forgiven for the sake of Jesus Christ. And it is faith in this promise of God, that for the sake of Jesus Christ, on account of his saving death and resurrection, all of your sins have been forgiven. This was the promise that was given to you in your baptism, the promise that I declared to you in the absolution at the beginning of this service, the promise that will be delivered to you by our Lord's true body and blood in the Sacrament of the Altar this day.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, your sins have been forgiven. All your sins have been forgiven; sins of the past, sins of the present, and sins of the future; sins known and sins unknown. My brothers and sisters, our gracious heavenly Father, has forgiven you and set you free from sin and death. And it is he, the one against whom you and I have sinned in thought, word, and deed, not seven times, nor seventy times seven, but continuously, day after day, and yet who freely forgives, who delights to forgive for the sake of Jesus who died and rose in our place; it is he who calls you to extend the same kind of forgiveness that you have received from him. *"Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us,"* we pray each day in the Lord's Prayer. Indeed, it is our daily experience of God's forgiving grace that frees us to forgive as we've been forgiven.

And now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen!