

As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us

A sermon for the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Matt 18:21-35

We have today a difficult text in the Gospel of Matthew. Peter asks: "Should I forgive seven times?" And the answer is: "Seventy times seven." And that doesn't mean when you get to 490, then it's O.K. not to forgive." It means totally. Then comes the parable of someone who owed ten thousand talents. In today's terms that's about twenty-five million dollars. The king was going to sell the servant and his family into slavery but the servant pleaded for mercy and the king forgave him his debt. This same servant then turned around to someone who owed him a mere twenty-five dollars, and when this one asked for mercy, the servant said no and threw him in prison. The point of the parable, which as usual is found in the last verse, is to forgive from the heart. The point is not just forgiving but forgiving from the heart. Lest we think that is just one verse, in one place, recall that when we pray the Lord's Prayer, we have the sentence which says: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

Even more striking is Matthew 6:9-13 which records what we call the Lord's Prayer and immediately following the Lord's Prayer the text continues: "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matt 6:14). That's harsh. Talk about tough. If you don't forgive others, you are not forgiven.

We ask ourselves: How do we do this? It's not only forgiving but forgiving from the heart. Then we ask ourselves: "I must think of all my sins, and how can I be complete enough? I might overlook something, forget something." There are books that list all kinds of sins, as a help, so to speak. But what about overlooking or forgetting sins?

Then in the second place, it says: "from the heart." Again there are helps that give one spiritual exercises or a plan for meditating on the cross for a certain amount of time so that you can do it sincerely and purely and from the heart. But finally the problem is: What about at the end? What about suddenly dying? Remember the thief on the cross at the last moment had a chance to repent. But it happens that people die unexpectedly. How is that handled because it doesn't say: "Forgive,

except at the end." It says "unless you forgive, you will not be forgiven" – very harsh, very complete.

What happens? As we look at the larger context in the Bible, we see there is something wrong here. It is like making it all mechanical, even manipulating God. We can go through all the formalisms.

But we remember Romans 6:5: "If you have been united with him in a death, you will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his." Paul is pointing to Baptism.

Basic to our Christian witness is: The cross is all-sufficient. Salvation does not depend on us in any way. The cross takes care of sin, death, and the power of evil.

Of course the flip side of that is the thought: "I can take advantage of that!" That gives me a free pass. Paul takes this up in Romans 3:6, 6:1, and 6:15. He writes that the temptation is to say: "Let us sin that grace may abound."

There's a preacher's story about this: There was a pious boy who wanted a bicycle and he prayed and prayed for a bicycle, but no bicycle appeared. He then said to himself: "Well, I'm doing something wrong here." He went out and stole a bicycle and asked for forgiveness.

What does Paul mean in these three places? When someone says: "We're forgiven anyway," Paul is saying: "You don't get it." Commonly in our modern Western world we think that our problem is only a problem if we think it's a problem. We're only sinning if we think it's sin. It's up to me to decide. But there is a real difference between psychological guilt and theological guilt. We respect feelings, but this is not a matter of feelings. This is about theological guilt. Luther famously pointed out that whatever we do ends up in spiritual pride or spiritual despair. What Luther has said is reflecting a place in 1 Corinthians 4:3-5 where Paul says: "I do not even judge myself; God alone judges."

How does God work? How does God make it so that we don't live in this confusion and then collapse. We recall what it says in the Psalm for today, Psalm 103, particularly verses 10-12:

"He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor requite us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west. So far does he remove our transgressions from us."

Then to come back to the New Testament, to the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:21: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

To put that into story language: He took our sin; we get in return his holiness. It's the best deal there ever was. Luther, in writing about this in the Large Catechism, says:

"We urge you to confess your sins not for the purpose of performing a work but to hear what God wishes to say to you. The Word or absolution, I say, is what you should concentrate on, magnifying and cherishing it as a great and wonderful treasure to be accepted with all praise and gratitude" (LC: Confession 22; Tappert 459, Kolb/Wengert 478).

We focus not on our sins but on what he has done in forgiving us. A little bit earlier writing about Baptism, Luther says: "Repentance, therefore, is nothing else than a return and approach to Baptism" (LC: Baptism 79; Tappert 446, Kolb/Wengert 466). We return every day to the starting point where he has made us his own. Every day we begin anew in Baptism with the life and the hope that are there forever. Amen