

Matthew 18:21-35 17th Sunday after Pentecost September 26, 1993

<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."

I can't tell you about the readings up there in front dressed in a robe. I think the first lesson and the gospel are a trick. Deceiving.

Take Joseph. Sure he had been stripped and thrown into a well by his brothers. I know that he had been sold into slavery - spent some lonely days and nights, even been thrown into prison. His brothers were scoundrels, jealous no-goods. But I am supposed to tell you about what a wonderful, forgiving person Joseph is. Sure he was forgiving, he could afford to be. He was the second highest ruler in all of Egypt. His brothers were on their knees, trembling in fear that Joseph would take revenge. I could forgive too if I was on top.

But some of us are women, asked to forgive the man that has hit you, and cheated on you, and called you every filthy name he could think of. He's not on his knees, begging forgiveness but arrogant, still hurting you.

Some of us are without jobs, without money because a boss was a jerk. Someone else now takes home the check that was once yours, everything is normal at work except you are no longer there.

Some of us are kids, always on the receiving end of the smart comments. An older brother or sister, a classmate at school, can't say a single nice word, only put-downs. How can you forgive when you are still being hurt every day?

Joseph had it easy.

Or that king Jesus told about.

Sure he forgave a large sum of money. He told his slave to forget the debt of billions of dollars. But he could afford to do that. He was still king, the slave was still a slave.

But the slave when he came for the money his fellow slave owed him needed the money. Though the king forgave him the debt that didn't put any money in his pocket. He needed food for his family, money for his mortgage, cash to pay for his children's shoes. He couldn't forgive his fellow slave's debt - couldn't afford to forgive.

Think about it. What does it cost God to forgive? God has everything. All power, all glory, all time.

God is Joseph, ruler over all. God is the king in the parable, giving from God's abundance.

But you and I have so little. When someone ruins a day for us, or a year, or ten years of a marriage, they have robbed us of a precious hunk of our human life. Nothing can ever replace that time. There is no starting over from the beginning to build the kind of life we dreamed of having.

For some of you there will be no fiftieth anniversary celebration surrounded by children and grandchildren. That can never happen now.

For some a secure retirement will never be because of a decision to terminate your job.

Some struggled so with the put downs of an older brother that it is as if you started years behind all the rest in learning to live a normal life.

People hurt us and the cost is tremendous. When we forgive we are giving so much more than Joseph did, or that king, or even God.

At least until Jesus.

Think about when Jesus said, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." He was high above everyone else then, hanging on a cross. They all intended to take not a little of his time but all of it. And they wanted to send him off in style, filling his last moments with agony, with humiliation - spitting on him, smashing thorns into his skull, whipping him.

In the middle of it all Jesus prayed, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do."

This would be like Joseph crying out words of forgiveness from the bottom of the well, believing in the power of God for good among the snakes and the spiders and the rats.

Jesus, asked for forgiveness as we humans crucified him.

In all of God's living, this is the moment we believe that God is most clearly seen. In forgiving us as God dies.

In Jesus God is no king letting go of a great debt as he sits surrounded by his wealth. In Jesus God is no ruler, being generous to brothers who kneel before him. In Jesus God is certainly not the forgiven slave who demands the last penny. No, in Jesus parable God is the fellow slave, seized by the throat, commanded to pay what you owe, thrown into prison for a debt that was not even his. Yet God forgives.

No one has a right to forgiveness - not Joseph's brothers, not the slaves in the story nor any of the people who have sinned against you.

But Jesus promises you that he can make you like himself. Jesus promises that he can sweep all the bitterness and desire for revenge from your heart. Jesus promises to give you the power to forgive.

Even if you are not on top - even if everything is not turning out all right - even if daily you are still living in the pain of another's sin against you, Jesus is able to give you the power to forgive.

Maybe it is like this. Maybe we can forgive because we know we are the king. We are Joseph. For we will be like Jesus, crucified now, but living with God forever. You will be like Jesus, living with the God who is love, forever and ever.

True, no one has a right to your forgiveness. But you are free to forgive - the very best gift you have to give. Amen.