

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost – September 13, 2020

Introduction

The Gospel for September 13th continues to explore the dynamics of Christian community. Matthew's intended readers were struggling with how their community of faith should deal with dramatic differences that were emerging between its members.

First, some background is in order. Our best scholarship indicates that Matthew's Gospel came into its final form sometime between the years 80-90 of the Christian era. This is 50-60 years after Jesus' death and resurrection. Its style and content place it in the city of Antioch [located in Syria] which is known to have had a large Jewish community. Antioch was a bustling center of commerce in the Roman Empire that also had a strong Christian community. As a matter of fact, Acts 11.26 tells us that '*in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.*' Antioch eventually was to supplant Jerusalem as the center of early Christianity.

Matthew's church community was in transition. In Antioch, there was a strong contingent of Jews who had become followers of Jesus. They lived by the Torah and saw Jesus as the fulfillment of the Messianic prophecies found in the writings of the prophets. However, because of the Apostle Paul's missionary work, many Gentiles (non-Jews) were also becoming part of the Church. They had no background in the Jewish scripture and did not understand the Torah [Law]. For them, the Christian experience was simply having faith in Jesus and living that faith in the world. Therefore, Matthew's community of faith had natural fault lines that made '*being one in Christ*' difficult. The church in Antioch was also beginning to experience ostracism and persecution because they were followers of Jesus. The situation was such that the Christian community in Antioch needed to hear the story of Jesus afresh. Matthew's Gospel is the vehicle for telling that story.

Matthew presents Jesus as the Messiah and the 'new Moses' who brings a new way of being community to God's people. The Sermon on the Mount [Matthew 5-7] describes how that life will look like in the new community of faith. Later in the Gospel, Jesus speaks about the more practical aspects of life together in the Kingdom. To this divided community, Jesus turns to the issue of forgiveness – a necessity for the community to survive. And rightly so, forgiveness is an important part of our faith. The enduring message of the cross is that human sin has been forgiven by a gracious God who sacrificed his Beloved Son so that we might be reconciled to him. But what I find most interesting is how easy it is to limit forgiveness to something that stands between God and the believer. Even though we pray '*forgive us our trespasses as we*

forgive those who trespass against us' in the Lord's Prayer, forgiving a person who has wronged us is an uncommon happening. We are all aware of how often we hear our family and friends talk about long held grudges that have poisoned relationships with other family members or acquaintances. As I say in today's sermon, forgiveness is the 'coin of the realm' in Christian community. We cannot survive and fulfill our ministries without it.

It might be helpful to think about what it means 'to forgive' someone who has sinned against us. For those who are disciples of Jesus, the idea of forgiveness raises a number of questions: *Why forgive? Is forgiveness dependent upon the repentance of the miscreant? What happens when we are unable to forgive others?* This short story from rabbinical tradition provides the beginning of an answer.

A Rabbi once asked his students, 'How can we determine the hour of dawn, when the night ends and the day begins?'

One student answered, 'Is it when you can distinguish between a dog and a sheep in the distance?' 'No,' the Rabbi answered.

'Is it when you can distinguish between a fig tree and a grapevine?' asked a second student. *'No,' said the Rabbi.*

'Please tell us the answer, then,' urged the students. Said the wise teacher, 'It is when you have enough light to look human beings in the face and recognize them as your brothers and sisters. Until then, the darkness is still with us.'

The words of Jesus remind us that we are not of the world; they remind us that God loves all human beings more than life itself; and they remind us that no one is beyond his redeeming hand — even those whom we think to be our enemies. When all is said and done, I believe that forgiveness is one of the signs of the Kingdom's presence among us. We can forgive because God has first forgiven us . . . We can forgive because, as the Psalmist writes, *' . . . As far as the east is from the west, so far does the LORD remove our transgressions from us.'*

Pastoral Notes

Worship: Our next outdoor worship will be on September 27, 2020 at both Bethel and Immanuel. As before, we will hold our communion service in the parking lot. Thank you to all who come early and help set an altar, chairs, and the sound system. We continue to socially distance and wear masks. The leadership of Bethel and Immanuel will keep you posted about worship plans as we move deeper into the fall season.

Sarah Larson: We offer our congratulations and prayers as Sarah is ordained into the ministry of Word and Sacrament in the ELCA. She will be ordained by Bishop Thomas Aitken on September 13th. Sarah will begin her ministry at Zion Lutheran Church in Milaca, Minnesota in October.

Call Process: We continue to move forward with call process for our parish. The initial draft of the Ministry Site Profile [MSP] for the Bethel-Immanuel Lutheran Parish has been completed and will be sent to the council presidents for presentation to each church council for revision and approval. We hope to have the MSP ready for submittal the Northeastern Minnesota Synod no later than October 1, 2020.

**In Christ ✝,
Pastor Steve**

Gospel – Matthew 18.21-35

²¹Then 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?”

²²Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. ²³For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; ²⁵and, 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. ²⁶So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ ²⁷And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸But 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.’ ²⁹Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ ³⁰But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. ³¹When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. ³²Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ ³⁴And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. ³⁵So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

“Forgiveness: A New Way of Doing Business”

Let us pray. [*The following prayer is taken from Psalm 51 . . . a psalm of confession.*]

O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall declare your praise. Had you desired it, I would have offered sacrifice, but you take no delight in burnt offerings. The sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your loving-kindness; in your great compassion, blot out my offenses. Wash me through and through from my wickedness and cleanse me from my sin.

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me in your free Spirit. Amen.

Brothers and sisters, grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I would like to begin by sharing a personal story with you . . . a story about something that happened to me many years ago when I was in the 6th grade. And, to be honest with you, it’s taken me a long time to deal with what happened to me.

The first person I can remember hating was Jimmie Hall. We were both in the sixth grade, but Jimmie was big for his age. He was a bully and we all lived in fear of him. Jimmie was the last one to get on the bus in the morning. Wherever he sat, there was trouble. He took our hats, he ripped up our papers, and he gave us knuckle rubs on the top of our heads. Every day I prayed that Jimmie would sit with someone else. I even prayed for him. But one day, in front of everyone on the bus, he hit me in the face and dared me to hit him back. I tried, but I missed. I was humiliated in front of my friends. Not only did I get a bloody nose, but from that time onward, I hated Jimmie Hall more than anyone else in all the world.

Strangely enough, Jimmie dropped out of sight during the summer. I never saw him again. But unfortunately, I had learned something that day that humankind has known from the beginning of time: **I learned how to hate.** Since then, there have been many other Jimmie Hall in my life. His successors have not taken my hat . . . They have not ripped up my papers . . . And they haven't even threatened me physically; but nonetheless, I learned the lesson well . . . *The same hatred I learned long ago still lingers within me. It’s so easy now to hate someone whom you do not like.*

My experiences cannot be unique. I suspect that each one of you has a Jimmie Hall somewhere in our past. And each Jimmie Hall has many successors for whom our hatred is still very real. As we get older, we use words other than **hatred** to describe our feelings. The words **dislike** and **not care for** seem much more acceptable to us. Sometimes, we even try to fool ourselves into thinking that hatred is justified, or that it is moral, or that it is necessary for survival.

It's easy to hate those who are different from us; be it in their politics, religion, skin color, or ethnic origin. It happens in school . . . It happens at work . . . And most embarrassing of all, it even happens here at church. When we hate others, Satan never loses. The evil one always wins because we become what we hate . . . The traits we so despise in others, soon become our traits. Their belligerence, their close-mindedness, and their infatuation with evil are soon part of us.

But as followers of Jesus, we have been given the gift of forgiveness. Every sin that blackens our soul . . . every sin that seeks to separate us from our Father in heaven . . . every such sin has been forgiven. So complete is our forgiveness that we are promised life after death.

It all started with the Sermon on the Mount. When his disciples asked Jesus how to pray, he said, "PRAY LIKE THIS: OUR FATHER WHO ART IN HEAVEN, HALLOWED BE THY NAME. THY KINGDOM COME, THY WILL BE DONE ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN. GIVE US THIS DAY OUR BREAD FOR THE MORROW; AND FORGIVE US OUR DEBTS, AS WE ALSO HAVE FORGIVEN OUR DEBTORS; AND LEAD US NOT INTO TEMPTATION, BUT DELIVER US FROM EVIL. AMEN."

The Lord's Prayer is special. We are to address God as a small child addresses a parent. We are to trust that it is God's will to graciously include us in the Kingdom. And we are to be assured that God will provide for us and protect us from the evil one. Yet what makes the Lord's Prayer dangerous, is one simple phrase: **'FORGIVE US OUR SINS, AS WE FORGIVE THOSE WHO SIN AGAINST US.'** When we utter these words, we pray that God would deal with our sin just as we deal with the sin of others. Every time we pray the Lord's prayer, we link our own salvation to our willingness to forgive others.

The disciples had been with Jesus for a long time. They knew that forgiveness was a high priority in his Kingdom. They had learned that sinners and outsiders alike must be forgiven and welcomed into the Church. But the disciples still did not understand the dynamics of forgiveness in their own lives. With Peter as their representative, they asked a critical question, **'Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?'**

Peter and the disciples were concerned about the frequency of forgiveness. In effect, it is a question of limits. ‘How often must we forgive others?’ By asking the question, it was evident that their understanding of forgiveness had not changed. According to rabbinic tradition, it was held that one must forgive another up to three times for the same offense. When Peter suggested seven times, he thought that he was going well beyond what God could possibly expect. But Jesus did not commend Peter. Instead, he said, **‘I DO NOT SAY TO YOU SEVEN TIMES, BUT SEVENTY-SEVEN. According to Jesus, forgiveness has no limits.**

To illustrate his point, Jesus told the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant. It is the story of a servant who incurred a debt of 10,000 talents to the King – Today this would be millions and millions of dollars. The sum was staggering. When the man could not repay the debt, the King ordered him put into jail and his family sold into slavery. But the man fell on his knees and begged for mercy. He pleaded for time and promised to pay the debt in full. In spite of his ludicrous promise to repay what he owed, the King had pity on him and forgave the entire debt.

When the servant went out from the King, he saw a fellow servant who owed him 100 denarii . . . mere pennies. He seized him by the throat and demanded payment in full. When the man asked for more time to repay the debt, the unforgiving servant would not hear of it. He threw him into prison until he paid it all.

Upon hearing what happened, the King summoned the first servant and said, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you besought me; and should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger, he delivered him to the jailers, till he should pay all his debt. Then Jesus said, **‘SO ALSO, MY HEAVENLY FATHER WILL DO TO EVERY ONE OF YOU, IF YOU DO NOT FORGIVE YOUR BROTHER FROM THE YOUR HEART.’**

In the parable, God’s inconceivable act of mercy is portrayed so that the listener can only stand in awe and amazement. We are sinners . . . and the sin which blackens our heart makes us deny both our Father in heaven and his claim upon our lives. We want nothing to do with him, and as such, we stand under his judgment.

You see, our debt is also large. Yet sin notwithstanding, every time we gather for worship, we begin with a confessional service which asks for his forgiveness. Monthly, we receive Holy Communion, which again gives the forgiveness of sins. And in our daily devotions, we confess our sins to God and receive his assurance of forgiveness. The good news is that God is more willing to forgive than we are to

repent. Like the servant, we are forgiven a debt which we never can repay. But it is at this point that the gift of forgiveness becomes perilous.

Forgiveness is the coin of the realm in the Kingdom of God. It is something that must be shared. There can be no limits as we forgive others, because God himself sets no limits as he forgives us. The necessity of forgiving others is grounded upon two facts. First, we all live under the forgiveness of God which given in Baptism and renewed in Holy Communion. And second, Jesus rose again from the dead to achieve victory, once and for all, over sin. What this means is that God has forgiven our sin in its entirety.

This means that we must open our hearts and expose the wounds inflicted by our brothers and sisters. It means that we bring them out into the healing light of God's purity and give them over to him . . . It means that we forgive our enemies' sins against us and reclaim them as brothers and sisters. In short, forgiveness means that we are reunited as the whole family of God with neither our sin, nor their sin, standing between us.

These are hard words; and alone, we could not bring ourselves to do them. But the good news today is that we are not alone . . . The good news is that when we speak of forgiveness, we must always speak of Jesus. When he taught us the Lord's Prayer, Jesus points to himself. It is he who taught us to say 'FORGIVE US OUR DEBTS, AS WE HAVE ALSO FORGIVEN OUR DEBTORS.' And it is he who says, 'BECAUSE OF ME . . . BECAUSE I AM HERE, THIS IS POSSIBLE.' And because Jesus became our brother . . . because he paid for this kinship with his life, God will forgive us. This same Jesus promises to go with us . . . first to our neighbor . . . for me to Jimmie . . . We go to offer our forgiveness; and then we go to God to claim the forgiveness that is ours. Amen