Sermon *Let's Talk About Forgiveness (As We Have Been Forgiven)*
The Very Rev. David J. Marshall, All Angels 9.13.26

Exodus 14:19-31
Psalm 114
or Exodus 15:1b-11,20-21
Romans 14:1-12
Matthew 18:21-35

I've been thinking about the Early Church. It started on the first Easter with the surprising and joyful experience of our risen Savior. The Church grew quietly, suffered persecution and was eventually tolerated in the early 300s. At that time, it was estimated that the Church comprised 20% of the population of empire. That's a lot of growth! One of the distinctive features of the Early Church was joy and forgiveness. They practiced forgiving others and they had joy. I know that forgiveness is hard, but I have to tell you there is joy in letting go. The Early Church knew that. They retained and passed along stories of Jesus, and his apostles, forgiving others and taught the converts to do the same. And honestly, the Early Church had a lot to forgive because of how they were treated, especially by the empire. Yet, despite that, they forgave, they had joy, and they grew.

Speaking of forgiveness, today's Gospel lesson – the parable of the unforgiving servant – has to do with forgiveness is an exaggerated way. Jesus's parables were exaggerated to make a teaching point, to show a larger truth about who we are and who God is, and, in my opinion, to remind us (19 centuries later) that it is not a factual story but one that will leave a lasting impression.

In summary, a servant owed the King 10,000 talents. That is an absurd amount of money. For a point of reference, one talent is 75 pounds of gold – not ounces, pounds. 75x10,000 = 750,000 pounds of gold. [After the sermon, one of our teenagers did the math. Gold right now is $64,000 per pound. In today's money, the servant owed 48 billion dollars. That's an absurd amount indeed.] In a surprising move, the servant asked for forgiveness and the king agreed.

Imagine the joy you would feel if you owed 10k talents and suddenly was forgiven the debt.

But here's something interesting with the parable, that same day – when he was forgiven – the forgiven servant saw someone who owed him just 100 days of labor/pay. He grabbed the man who owed him by the throat and demanded payment. Using the same words, the man asked to be forgiven; but the servant refused and threw him into debtors' prison until his family could raise the money to get him out.

The King heard about this, brought in the servant who he had forgiven, reprimanded him and "had him tortured until all the money was repaid". Then – this is the important part – Jesus said, "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

Oh, that's the point. We are to forgive one another.

The “tortured” part bothered me until I reflected on times in my life when I refused to forgive someone. I found it to be torturing to myself not to forgive (but not for the other guy, he didn’t seem to care one way or the other). So I don’t think it’s God who tortures us for not forgiving, it’s an internal torture.

One way to look at unforgiveness is allowing someone to live rent free in your head. What they did caused you pain and you refuse to let go of it. Forgiveness, on the other hand, evicts them out of your head and (here’s the important part) you do not pursue them for unpaid back rent. Forgiveness releases them from what they owe you and, in turn, you find out that forgiveness has actually set you free.

This parable was given to us because Peter asked the question: how often must I forgive; up to seven times?! In my mind’s eye, Peter is very frustrated and would like to know, seriously, how often. Seven is a lot, honestly, to forgive someone. And, just because it’s you and me, I wonder if Peter was talking about Judas Isacarot. From what we know – particularly in John’s Gospel – Judas wasn’t an easy person to be around. If it was Judas, I can imagine Jesus saying something like, “Peter, if you only knew what it’s going to take to forgive this brother; if you only knew…”

In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus responds to Peter’s question with this: No, it’s not seven times. It’s 77 times!

In other words, you have to forgive a lot; like make a practice out of it.

Forgiving from the heart, as Jesus said, has to do with spiritual mercy that comes from God first and it leads us to have mercy on one another. We recognize that God has forgiven us a lot (more than 77 times). Because of our spiritual mercy, we can/should have mercy on one another.

There is nothing we can do to earn spiritual mercy from God. It’s a gift – called grace. God does it because that is who God is. What we are asked is to take our spiritual mercy and give others forgiveness. If you are wondering about whenever God has forgiven you, let’s take a brief look at the Ten Commandments.

Number 1: I am the Lord your God who brought you out of bondage. You shall have no other gods but me.

Because it’s just you and me, let me ask you a question: Have you ever from time to time put something in the place where God should be? When I was growing up, Christmas was a time when I may, from time to time, place something where God should be – particularly in Christmas gifts. I may have been more excited about the gifts under the tree than the gift of the Incarnation of Christ. And that’s just the start of it. A spiritual advisor asked me once if I was placing the Church, or ministry, or the Book of Common Prayer in place of God. Yet, God has forgiven me each time – not out of my own goodness but out of God’s spiritual mercy.

Number 2: you shall not make for yourself any idol.

Like number one, we from time to time idolize things and make idols.

Number 3: You shall not invoke with malice the name of the Lord your God.

Number 4: Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.

Oops. I don't always keep the Sabbath day holy – I work, I'll toil, I'll put other things first instead of rest and reflection on God. And then there were the college years… and the years that followed. Yet God's mercy flows on us.

How about the last one:
Number 10: You shall not covet anything that belongs to your neighbor.

You know, at the gym the other day, I saw a turquoise Porsche 911 with extra wide racing tires… The thing about coveting is that we forget about all that we've been blessed with. For me, I have wonderful, reliable transportation that makes me happy. But, when I see my neighbor's Porsche, my mind starts to wander.

God has blessed me richly with good things that I need. But when I covet, I forget (negate?) what God has done. Suddenly I recognize that the Porsche is renting space in my head (without paying rent). And, again, I come to God seeking forgiveness and I receive spiritual mercy. What God asks is that I then have mercy on others.

In the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, Jesus gives us a prayer we now call the Lord's Prayer. In the middle, we pray this: Forgive us our trespasses (debts) as we forgive those who trespass against us (debtors). **As we forgive** we are forgiven. And honestly, it's torture if we don't.

As we go through our day, and as we think about those who are renting space in our head and not paying for it, we are reminded of what we need to release and let go because we have been forgiven. Knowing that we should have no other god but God, we should make no idols, we should keep the Sabbath holy, we shouldn't covet what others have - knowing all of that and that from time to time we fail at it. Remember that we are forgiven because of God's spiritual mercy and that we are to have mercy on one another and to forgive.

I can truly tell you when we forgive, when we evict somebody out of our head who's not paying rent, that joy will follow. And that joy is the same joy that the early church felt. That joy is the same joy that God has prepared for all of us. Because the kingdom of heaven is like a king who has forgiven 10,000 talents.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.