

Twenty-Second Sunday after Trinity, November 13, 2022

Readings: *Micah 6:6-8; Philippians 1:3-11; Matthew 18:21-35*

Walking humbly with our God and forgiving one another

With what shall we come before the Lord (Micah 6:6) who forgives all our sins, and how often shall our fellow Christians sin against us and we forgive them (Matt.18:21)? Our gracious God on high does not need our "burnt offerings" or "thousands of rams" (Micah 6:6-7), which we could legitimately offer in thanksgiving. He is the Savior who gave His only-begotten Son for our transgression. He offers the fruit of His body, once hanging dead on a cross but now living and giving life in His holy Meal, for the sin of our souls (Micah 6:7). Because He releases us from our enormous debt of sin against Him, we need not imprison our fellow sinners with our lack of love and refusal of forgiveness (Matt. 18:24, 27, 30). As partakers of His grace, we yearn for one another "with affection of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:8). As forgiven sinners, "filled with the fruit of Christ's righteousness," our "love may abound more and more, with knowledge and discernment" (Phil. 1:11, 9), for He leads us "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with [our] God" (Micah 6:8).

Sermon Transcript:

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

It's always interesting when the Gospel reading ends on something that doesn't quite sound like the Gospel, "So also the Heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart." That sounds like an awful lot of comfort, doesn't it? Well, thank God for Peter, because Peter always gives me hope. He's never one to not shy away from sticking his foot in his mouth when the time comes. He always speaks first and then thinks. And sometimes that works to his favor, but most of the time it doesn't.

So Peter's going to Jesus... And I'm not quite sure what the occasion was, but somehow Peter was trying to impress Jesus, or justify himself. We're not quite sure what, but he goes to Jesus, "How many times when my brother sins against me do I need to forgive him? Seven times?" Now at seven, Peter thought he would be really generous. I mean, Peter was thinking he would be showing Jesus how wonderful and great Peter was, because he said, "Seven times." The law itself, or at least as the Sadducees and the Pharisees and the scribes and the rabbis taught, the law said three times. After that, you could ignore them and hold their sin against them. You have to forgive them at least three times and then you were done.

As so Peter, being the generous man that he is, he doubled it, then added one, so seven times, because seven's a good number. It's a holy number. So he thought he was being really generous. And then Jesus turns to Peter, and says, "No, not just seven times, but 70 times seven." Now, lest you think that as long as you can count up to 490, then you can stop, this number is symbolic, like many numbers in Scripture. Seven being a holy number, and then 10 times seven again, being that number of wholeness and completion. In other words, you are to always, every single occasion, forgive your brother when they have wronged you, without exception or anything, or any caveat whatsoever.

Now look at how Jesus then explains this. "The kingdom of God can be compared to this king, who is settling accounts with his servants." So there is going to come a time we know, when we will have to settle our accounts between us and God. And to put that into perspective, the debt that we owe to our God is only

vaguely referenced in this parable. Jesus says this servant owes 10,000 talents. 10,000 talents is equal to 10,000 years worth of wages. Okay. So this man, take your yearly wage, multiply it by 10,000, and that's the debt the guy owed to his master. There is no way in the world this guy is ever going to even come close to repay this debt. So then the question comes, "How in the world did he get that deep in debt in the first place?" The fact of the matter is, we are in that deep of the debt and worse. There is no way we can pay God back for the evil that we have done. We are sinners and we have rebelled against God, and we have not loved God with our whole heart, our whole mind, and our whole soul, and our whole strength. Nor, even worse, have we not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We owe a debt. We have offended God so much that our debt to Him could never be paid. And yet how often do we hold a grudge against our neighbor? How often do we judge our neighbor? Now I'm not talking about, "Oh, they made a mistake, and we'll let it slide." I'm talking about people who purposefully have done you wrong. See, the guy that the servant went to who owed him a hundred talents, it was a real debt. He had a debt against this other servant.

So when God talks about us forgiving somebody 70 times seven, He's not just talking about the people that are easy to forgive, that didn't mean it, that weren't trying to offend us. He's talking about the people that did mean it. He's talking about the people that really did deserve our anger and our frustration. He's talking about the people who chose to do us wrong, because they wanted to, and He tells us to forgive them. He's not talking about the easy people to forgive. He's talking about the hard ones. He's talking about the ones that don't deserve it. By human law, human standard, we should cut them off. We are called to forgive even them. Now, to forgive them is not the same as allowing them to continue to infect our lives and whatnot, but we are still called to forgive. Now, how in the world can we do that? I don't know. It's beyond human ability.

All right. We're in Micah's then. And here's Micah trying to figure out kind of the same thing, "What am I supposed to do before God? How do I make myself right before God?" And he's asking the question, "What do I do? How can I bow myself before God on high? Does He desire burnt offerings? Calves a year old? Is He pleased with thousands of rivers of oil?" Now the interesting thing about this is, is that is indeed exactly what God demanded in the Old Testament. Sacrifices of lambs and goats and rams and steer and everything, guilt offerings, sin offerings, faith offerings, oil to be given to God. God told them that this is what they needed to do, in order to be right with God. And yet, is that really what God wants? Is God really going around, "You know what? I really want a bunch of sacrifices, a bunch of blood flowing to my Temple all the time. That's what I'm really looking for." So Micah is trying to figure out, "What does God require? What is God asking of us?" And he's talking about these sacrifices and the gifts of them and oil and the brains and everything like that. And that is indeed, like I said, what God demanded in the Old Testament, but it's not what God desired.

What God desires is for us to be holy and righteous before Him, and with our neighbor. What God desires is us to be as forgiving of our neighbor as He is of us. And we cannot do that. They couldn't do it, nor can we. So in the place of us actually living up to the standards of God, He said, "You know what? You're not going to make it, so I'm going to offer you some grace. You offer these sacrifices and I will count it as credit to your account. It's not what I want, but in My grace, I'm going to give it to you. I'm going to give you something you can actually do." But it wasn't them doing it to save them, it was their faith that God's Word was true. That if they believe the Word of God and trusted what He said, that they would indeed be right before God, because God declared it to be so.

But God doesn't want sacrifices. He doesn't want us to go through the legal system of what we have to do. What He wants is for us to act as His children, to love each other. Even the wayward children, even the black sheep, even the children that have rebelled, we are called to love them as well. It's all fine and good for us to love somebody that loves us back, or that intends us well. But to love those who are unlovable, to love those who have offended us, that's a lot more difficult.

And yet, that is exactly what has happened to each and every one of us. We have offended God that much. I mean, the Heavenly Father will judge us on the last day. And where do you put your hope in that that judgment is going to come out in your favor? Examine your life. Have you been as kind and loving and forgiving to everybody in this world as you ought to have? I'd love to say that I have been there and so I'm confident that I can face God. Hmm. I'd love to say it but I can't.

None of us can stand before God confident that we have acted with integrity and love and grace and forgiveness in our lives. But all of us, every single one of us, can stand before God confident that we are forgiven. Because not only has He gotten rid of our debt by sending.. What does Micah say? I love the way Micah says this question, "Should I give up my firstborn for my transgressions, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" I could give up my firstborn, but it wouldn't do any good. Caleb, I'm not going to, I promise. I could, but it wouldn't do any good. My debt could, but it still wouldn't do any good.

But God did, and it does do all the good for all of us, for all of eternity. Micah is asking the question, "Should I give my firstborn?" "No." But if God gives His firstborn, then, "Yes, absolutely." And that's indeed exactly what He did. He gave His firstborn for the sins of my soul and the sins of your soul. And for that, we are free. And not only has He forgiven the sins of my soul, He's gone one step further. I'm no longer considered a servant of God, but I am His child. I owe this great amount of debt that I could never repay, and then God wipes the debt clean, and then makes me an heir to inherit what He already has.

Not only have I... Do I owe the debt, now I'm going to receive the blessings that He has, the riches of God, because I'm His child, because He has adopted me, and made me His own. For that great and marvelous deed that He has done, for the hope that I have, and the confidence that I have, how do I then respond? What do I do to show how grateful I am? What can I possibly do to communicate that I understand the depths of my depravity, that have been washed away by Christ? How can I demonstrate how much I appreciate what He has done for me?

Well, it's pretty straightforward. "Love one another, as I have loved you. Forgive one another. Walk, immersed with everybody. Let your light shine in this world, not your light, but the light of Christ within you." We are in a world that is filled with hatred, animosity. We are in a world where it seems like everybody is against everybody, and the world is trying to divide us by color, by creed, by whatever else, and that, "If you're not like me, then we should hate you." Or, "If I'm not like you, you should hate me." That's the world that we are currently living in.

But we are not of this world. We are of the Kingdom of God. And the people of the Kingdom of God love everybody, forgive everybody, walk in peace with everybody. We bear witness to the confidence that God is in us and with us, knowing that everybody needs to hear that. That knowing that everybody owes a debt to God, that they can never repay, but that God is just waiting to forgive that debt, and let them know that they are forgiven. That is what we are called to do. That is how we are called to live. Not because we have to, but because we get to praise God in doing something. We get to thank Him for His mercy in our life.

It's not in this text, but I'm reminded of the same kind of story, a different metaphor about removing the plank in my own eye, before I try and remove the splinter in somebody else's. And I just kind of love that imagery. If I think of myself as having this massive two by four sticking out of my face, puts me in a place of humility, realizing that I am a beggar before God, just like everybody else. And I don't need to go around trying to correct everybody else. All I need to do is thank God that He has removed my plank, and that He has removed your splinter, and to praise Him for His love and His grace and His mercy in my life and in yours. And that is what He will do. That is what He promises to do.

That is why we can stand confident with the Philippians knowing that we are His children, that He has done all of this before God, and that we are pure and blameless, though we owe Him everything, though our hearts were black with sin. We've been washed in the blood of Christ, and we are restored and forgiven. What a blessing that is. What a joy it is. Now, go for it, and live in the joy of your salvation, forgiving freely, as you have been freely forgiven.

And may His grace, mercy, and peace be and abide with you always, now and forevermore, unto life everlasting.

Amen.