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Pentecost 13

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“Forgiveness is Never Over”

Text: Matthew 18:21-35 (Genesis 50:15-21)

*(Thanks to the Rev. Jeff Horn for his excellent sermon on this text, and for some of the thoughts and words used in this sermon.)*

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

The most important commemoration going on today won't be at Ground Zero. It won't be at the Pentagon, either. Or near Shanksville, Pennsylvania. It won't be where politicians gather, speeches are made, bells are tolled, and we are told that we must never forget, and that we are stronger now than we were ten years ago. I don't want to belittle all of that. Those commemorations have their place.

But the most important commemoration going on today is *here*, and in every place where the Gospel is preached and the Sacraments are given in the name of Christ. Here and in every place where forgiveness and life are given.

For here is not a celebration of what we do or have done, but of what Christ has done for us.

Here is not a celebration of our togetherness, or the conquering of the human spirit. It is a celebration of the conquest of Christ in His death and resurrection over the terrorist attack of Satan, who knocked down not just a few buildings, but the entire human race; nay, the entire world.

Here, it is not the reading of many names that is most important, but the naming of one name: Jesus Christ. The one who conquered our enemies, and still does. Where through Holy Baptism, Holy Gospel, and Holy Supper, His victory over sin, death, and devil is given to us.

Here, the memorial is not made of concrete and silver and flowing water, but in eating the Body that hung from the wood of the cross, and drinking the Blood that flowed from it, given and shed *for you*.

Much more powerful than armies and smart bombs is the forgiveness of Christ which we receive here in this humble place, where altar, pulpit, and font are now

Ground Zero in the battle. For these are the places of our death and resurrection in Christ, as He places the power of His death and resurrection here, in these things, for you. You have His promise. And *the gates of hell cannot prevail against it* (Matt 16:18).

Therefore on such a day as today, it is particularly fortunate and important for us to hear the Word of God we heard today. These words from the lips of Jesus teaching us about forgiveness. The point is easy to understand: in comparison to the debt of sin which Christ forgives us - the ten thousand talents, the billion dollars - in comparison to that, the debt of sin against any of us - a hundred denarii, a hundred bucks - is very small. Christ rightly teaches this. That is not to belittle any of the sins committed against you; it is, rather, to magnify the sacrifice of Christ, who bore in His body on the cross the sins of us all. Every single last one, from the greatest to the least. And He did so in love, that you may be forgiven, freely and completely, and without any merit or worthiness in you. And having received that forgiveness, He calls us to live in forgiveness, rejoicing with thankful hearts in the mercy He has bestowed on us by His death and resurrection.

But it's not quite that easy, is it? It's easy to say, but forgiveness is hard. Especially on a day like today, where for many the wounds are still raw, and the pain still very real. A day like today, we could say, is a day when the rubber of this teaching hits the road of life. For today is a day that has caused many to wonder how to forgive; a day that has caused many anguish because they don't know how to forgive; a day that has caused many confusion because they don't even want to forgive. They know they should, but they don't know if they can. And then because of this struggle, and in the midst of this struggle, hearing these words from the lips of Jesus: ***"So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart,"*** and therefore to question: *Am I this man? Is my eternal life in jeopardy?*

But this is not a new problem, and it's not just today. It doesn't take a 9-11 to make us feel this struggle. There is no shortage of sin - horrible sin, unspeakable sin - that makes us feel this way. Sin committed against you. By people you should have been able to trust. Sin that has caused you pain that others do not know and cannot imagine; which has sunk deep down into your soul. Sins of abuse and humiliation, of adultery and betrayal, and worse. Scars that do not easily heal and hurts that still cry out. When those sins are committed against you and cause your world to come crashing down, they're not so easy to forgive, are they? They don't feel like "just a hundred denarii," but so much more. As one of my brother pastors once said: *The devil can pack a whole lot of hell into a hundred denarii.*

And it doesn't do a whole lot of good for me to stand up here, or for your fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, to say to you: But you *have* to forgive! You *must*

forgive! when you don't know how to forgive. When, maybe, you don't even want to forgive. And then what do you do when you *thought* you forgave, and then *years* later, the pain comes back, the hurt returns, and you look into your heart and wonder: Have I *really* forgiven? I thought I did, but I still remember, I still hurt. I don't want to, but I do. What now?

I think that happened to Joseph, you know. Joseph had a whole lot of hurt. He was betrayed by his brothers, sold into slavery and lived a slave's life, and was unjustly accused and imprisoned. And yes, God brought good out of it as he was set upon a throne by the Lord to save lives. We heard of all that today. But just because it sounds so easy, do not think it was. What surprised me was to find out that the reading from Genesis that we heard today *happened 17 years after Joseph forgave his brothers; 17 years after their reconciliation. 17 years later, his brothers still felt the weight of their sin, and Joseph still felt the hurt of their betrayal, for at the mere mention, the reminder of what happened, Joseph weeps. The pain still there, the scars still fresh. A hundred denarii can be a whole lot of weight. And maybe so it is with you, too.*

And then you realize: forgiveness is never over, is it? It's not one and done. It keeps going. Everyday. That's what Peter needed to learn. How many times do I have to forgive, Lord? Seven times? As if it were so easy.

But it's important for us to remember today - *to get the meaning right* - that Jesus told this parable in response to Peter's question: *Is there a limit to forgiveness?* And the answer is **no**. For every sin there is forgiveness. That's what Jesus has accomplished on the cross. *It is finished*. The power of sin, death, and the devil are finished. Completely. Of this you can be sure. Which is good news for you and me. For whatever sins you have committed and still commit today, none are beyond the forgiveness of Christ. None are too great to be forgiven - no matter how heinous, no matter how shameful, no matter how many. Know that. And rejoice in that love of Christ for you.

But that also means that Jesus has died for the forgiveness of those who sin against you - no matter how heinous, no matter how shamefully, no matter how often. The cross is greater than *all*. His death and resurrection is greater than all. And so the forgiveness we receive is the forgiveness we are to give.

But with this teaching, we dare not make Jesus into another Moses - that this is what you must do to enter eternal life. If that is so, then Jesus is no Saviour. For what good is it for Him to take you to within sight of heaven, to forgive *most* of your sins, and then leave you with this - this great chasm of forgiveness that is impossible for you to cross? Yet that is how these words are often heard, and how much pain and heartache such a misunderstanding has caused.

Are these words of Jesus strong words of Law? Absolutely. But so is it when Jesus says to us that we are all murderers when we harbor anger and bitterness in our hearts towards others; that we are all adulterers when we even lustfully look at another person - even if its just a picture or an internet video; that we are all thieves when we do not help our neighbor; that we are all gossips who murder our neighbor's reputation; that we are all idolators because we do not fear, love, and trust in God above all things; that the burden of sin you pile up every week, every day, is greater than you can imagine. What are you going to do with that?

Well, as with all the Law that crushes us and reveals the depth and enormity of our sin, it is not there to save us - it is there to kill our self-righteousness and pride, and drive us to repent. To drive us to our knees and say: *Lord, have mercy*. That's the real "sinner's prayer." To say: I got nothing. I so often think I do, that I've done so well . . . but I got nothing. Lord, teach me to forgive. Help me to forgive. Make me want to forgive. Heal the scars of my heart; the deep down pains. Because I can't make them go away. I can't forget about them. And so I'm scared. I'm scared because I hear your words and I don't know if I've forgiven the way that I should. I know I don't. *Lord, have mercy!* Cast me not away from your presence and take not your Holy Spirit from me (Psalm 51:10-11).

That's the prayer of 100 denarii. Jesus knows it isn't easy. He knows because He lived your 100 denarii, and mine. And in the midst of that hell - your hell! The sin and hurts and pains and scars that are eating away at you - in the midst of that hell, as He bore the torture, the sin, the pain, the punishment, the forsakenness, all of it on the cross; in that moment when He wrestled with the devil, He found a way to say: *Father, forgive them* (Luke 23:34). . . . Jesus knows it isn't easy. He said those words for you. So that you would know and be sure of His love, His mercy, His forgiveness. For you.

And know that He who went through that for you, can help you do the same. The forgiveness you need, He gives. The forgiveness you need for others, He gives. That His forgiveness might flow through you, to others in a world of hurt, too.

For in the end, that's the only thing that matters: the forgiveness of Christ. Sadly, many who gather today won't hear of that, and their burden will remain. That's why Peter's question is so important. That we know that forgiveness is never over, and that it's never *one and done*. The cross was! Yes. *It is finished*. But the reality of that forgiveness goes on. For you and through you to others. It's not easy. But that's why Jesus is here, still, for you. He didn't die on the cross and ascend into heaven and now is waiting for you to master this art of forgiveness and prove yourself worthy! *No!* He is here for you still. Speaking His "*I forgive you all your sins,*" to help you and heal you as no one else can.

And even more: now you will come and open your mouth that has spoken hurtful things and not spoken words of forgiveness; you will come and look upon the Body and Blood of the Lord with eyes that have seen what should not be seen; you will come on feet that have taken you where you should not have gone; you will come with a mind that has thought and desired shameful things . . . you will come and you will receive what you do not deserve: **the Body and Blood of your Lord, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins!** All of them. From the greatest to the least. Know that. He has promised. He is not here to make you fear, but to give you peace. For He is merciful.

And in the power of His life and love, of His forgiveness and His Spirit given to you, He will give to you also the faith and the strength and the healing and the courage to say: *Father, forgive them*. It isn't easy. I don't suspect it ever will be. But Jesus is merciful. And He has mercy on you.

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.