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Pentecost 15

Saint Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“Living in the Joy of Forgiveness”  
Text: Matthew 18:21-35

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

Peter asked a question. So Jesus told a parable. No surprise there. Jesus frequently answers questions with stories which contain His answer.

So what is His answer here? To Peter?

Well, Peter had asked Him: *Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?* First, give credit where credit is due. Peter is being generous here. The rabbis of that day said three times was the limit. Peter does them more than two times greater. So good for you, Peter! You're learning.

But Peter, here's where you're off track: not with the number you picked, but that you picked a number. Because it's not about numbers; it's not about counting. Never was. Never will be. In fact, if I can speak like this, God really doesn't like to count. He *can*, of course. He knows the exact number of hairs on each and every one of your heads, we are told (Matthew 10:30). But if you think God is into counting sins, knowing how many times you've broken each commandment, you've got God all wrong.

So Jesus tells a parable, to help us understand. And it's the beginning of this parable that we need to get right - otherwise we will misunderstand the whole thing.

So here goes: *Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants.* Now here's the question we must first answer to get this parable right: *why?* Why did the king want to settle accounts? And *why do it himself?* The president doesn't pay his own bills - he has someone do it for him. The CEO doesn't send out invoices - he has an accounting department to do that for him. Because presidents and CEOs have more important things to do. Presidential things, executive things. And this king has kingly things to tend to! This seems below him. It doesn't really make sense, when you think about it. Have a servant tend to the accounts. *Why do it himself?* . . . . Unless there's more to it than meets the eye. Unless it's really not about the money . . .

And that's really the answer: **he did it to do what he did!** This king wished to be

merciful. He brings his debtors in not to demand from them, not to coerce them, not to punish them, but to forgive them. This wasn't something the king would suddenly have decided to do. If he wanted his money, he would get his money. But the king knew such a debt could never be repaid. Ten thousand talents is more like a national debt than a personal one. It couldn't be repaid if the servant lived several lifetimes. The servant was pleading for his life. So the king wasn't going to hammer him for a few bucks - what's the point of that? And not very kingly. So instead of a debt that couldn't be paid and a servant who couldn't pay it, the king forgives. And in doing so, both receive what they could never have gotten before. Forgiveness brings the king joy and gives the servant his life back again.

***Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants.*** And notice what Jesus says here; don't overlook this little nugget: it is the king Himself who would settle the accounts, not the servants.

Which is what the kingdom of heaven is like, for it is what happens here each Sunday. The King is here to settle accounts. You have a debt you cannot pay. You don't even know how big the debt is! How much you have accumulated, how many sins you have done. But you cannot repay it. What you have done cannot be undone. What you have failed to do you cannot now go back and do. The hurts you have inflicted. The people you walked by and didn't help. The lies, the hate, the lust, the anger, the greed. So what are we to do but plead for our lives? Plead for mercy and grace and forgiveness. **And that is the very reason the King is here:** not to hammer you for a few bucks, or looking for a few drops of your blood; not to demand from you, coerce you, or punish you, but to forgive you. So He does. *I forgive you all your sins.* And they really are. Every last one. It is *His* joy, to give *you* joy. And life.

Because your King, your God, is not about counting, but about mercy. That's how He is. And that's how He wants His children to be. Not counters, not demanders, not coercers, not punishers, but joyful forgivers. And by our forgiveness bringing joy to *both* God *and* those we forgive.

*So it is a problem when we do not.* When we take the life that our good and gracious and generous King has given us back with His kind and merciful forgiveness, and use that gift of life that we have received to take away the lives of others and make them bitter.

Which is what the servant in this parable did. Just as the king did what he did because he wanted to be merciful, so the servant did what he did because he did not. This was no chance encounter. He went out and found a fellow servant who owed him a few bucks . . . *now that he could keep it!* Right? *Before*, when he owed the king, had he collected the money he would have to give it to the king to pay his debt. So what's the rush, right? But now that he was debt free, it would be his! So he does what the king would not: he demands, he coerces, he punishes. Payment in full! No mercy. No forgiveness. No life.

Prison.

So if you came here today, came before the King, and confessed your sins and received His absolution, but have no intention of forgiving that person who wronged you the other day . . . If you're going to make 'em pay for what they did to you! . . .

Or if you are planning on coming to the Altar in just a few moments to receive the Lord's Body and Blood for the forgiveness of your sins, all of them, but intend to hold onto that grudge you've been nursing, that slight you experienced, the payback you've been plotting . . .

If you think that is the way to live the new life of mercy and forgiveness you've been given by the death and resurrection of the King's own Son . . . If you think you've forgiven enough - even more than seven times! - so your forgiveness is used up . . . If you think that's how God rolls . . . that God's just going to let that be . . .

For maybe, this servant who owed his fellow servant was one who also owed a debt to the king, but had been forgiven, too. And filled with joy and life he went out from the king, only to have that joy and life taken away from him by this other servant, this *wicked servant*. *The gift of the king taken away*, robbing not only the servant, but also the king.

Do you think the king's going to take that lightly? No. For the king, this sin was *worse* than the enormous debt that had been forgiven. No spitting in the King's face. Or on His mercy.

So Peter, you decide. How big would you like mercy to be? How big would you like God's forgiveness *to you* to be? Seven times? Is that what you want? Or seventy times seven times? Or do you want that mercy that is as wide and high and long and deep as the cross? That forgiveness of each and every sin Jesus paid for by His own blood. What say you, Peter?

*And what say you, O Christian?* Still want to hold that grudge? Still want to make that person pay? Still want revenge? Is that the life you have been given in your Baptism, where your enormous, unpayable debt was paid and the old man in you died and a new man arose to live a new life? Is that the life that is fed and nourished here by the Body and Blood of your Saviour? Is that the life that brings joy to your Father in heaven? Is that the kind of life that brings joy to you? To go out from here and grab your fellow servants by the neck?

***Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?***

*He's your brother!* So as often as it takes. And even if he continues to sin against you, you are living in the joy of your forgiveness, and bringing joy to your Father in heaven.

And it is of benefit to you, too. Holding onto grudges, exacting revenge, plotting payback does not leave your heart undamaged, and even forgets the forgiveness it has been given and begins to think of God in that way. And so you wander from the forgiveness you so need, and the merciful Father you so need. And all of life becomes one big accounting - getting what I can and holding others accountable. And while that may be the way of the world, that is not the way of the kingdom of heaven; of your King, your God, your Saviour.

If that's the way you want it, that's the way you'll have it. But be careful what you wish for. And what you live for. Better by far is the way of the cross. The Son of God who gave His life for you that you may live. That Son of God who paid your debt to make you free. The Son of God who came to settle accounts, **and did**. Himself. The Son of God who didn't come to wrap His hands around your neck and say: *Pay what you owe!* But who came and wrapped His arms around you and said: **I paid what you owe!** Go, you are free. And you really are. That's why He came and what He's all about. What He came to do what He did. Not looking to shed a few drops of your blood, but wanting to shed His, *for you*.

That's the joy of the Lord for you, and the joy the Lord wants for you. Don't let the devil, the world, or your own sinful nature ruin it or take it away from you, when they try to convince you that revenge is better than forgiveness, that anger is better than love, that greed is better than grace. No. That's not how your Father rolls, so that's not how you roll. The one who gave you new birth is merciful - then *and now*. So come, receive that mercy and life. Come, receive the debt-cancelling forgiveness of God in the Body and Blood of Jesus. And then go and spread the joy! Go and mercy. **Go and forgive.**

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.