



# LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

## A Sermon for the Twenty-second Sunday after Trinity St. Matthew 18:21-35 Fr. William Klock

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Jesus had just been explaining to the disciples how to respond when someone sinned against them. “If your brother sins against you, go to him...alone...and talk it out between the two of you.” Don’t go whining or blabbing about it to everyone else. “Go to your brother, have it out between the two of you, and if he listens to you, you’ve won him back. If he won’t, then you should go back to him with another brother—a witness—and only after that do you take the matter public to the whole assembly. If he still won’t listen, if he still won’t admit his sin, *then*—and only then—you treat him like you would a Gentile or a tax collector—like an outsider.”

That’s good advice. Don’t make the problem any bigger than it needs to be. Don’t cause your brother to have a bad reputation with others—because it may well be the case that he didn’t even realise that he’d done something wrong. Maybe *you* misinterpreted what happened. A lot of our problems are easily resolved if we just go and talk to the other person involved. We confess or we forgive—or sometimes both—and we move on without losing or hurting that brother or sister.

But I can picture Peter sitting there, listening to this, and thinking, “That’s all well and good. I’m happy to do that. In fact, maybe instead of being so impetuous and prone to losing my temper, I should really be more like this. *But* what if it keeps happening over and over?” We’ve all know that situation. Your brother or sisters wrongs you, you go to him, you talk it out, he asks you to forgive him and you do, and then not too long after he does it again—and again—and again. So—and this is where our

Gospel today picks up at Matthew 18:21, “Peter came to Jesus and said, “Lord, how many times do I have to forgive my brother when he sins against me? Is seven enough?”

Peter thought seven was pretty generous. A lot of us would probably struggle—*have* struggled—to forgive someone fewer times than that. The rabbis seem to have thought that *three* times was enough. They seem to have got that from passages like Amos 2:4 and Job 33:29. Through Amos the Lord said that for three sin of Moab—and later for Judah—and for four, I will not revoke punishment. But that’s not saying that he would forgive three sins, but four was too much. The Lord’s point was that Moab and Judah were heaping up transgressions and that they were *unrepentant* about it. Under the circumstances, he could no more forgive the first three than the fourth. But that may be the sort of idea Peter had grown up with. Be generous, like the Lord, and forgive your brother three times, but after that...no more. But Peter’s been watching and listening to Jesus and he’s seeing mercy and grace the likes of which he’d never seen before and he’s thinking, “Okay. The rabbis say I should forgive my brother three times; maybe I should be more gracious. Is seven times enough, Jesus?”

And Jesus responds, “I wouldn’t say seven times, but as many as seventy times seven times!”

Just when we think we’ve got this kingdom mindset figured out, Jesus comes along and shows us just how far we have to go. Really, Jesus’ point to Peter here is that if you’re going to put a number on it, if you’re going to put a limit on your forgiveness, you really haven’t understood what God’s kingdom is about at all. And that, I think, is why he tells Peter, “Why not seventy times seven times?” Jesus’ point is that there’s no limit, but to say it he draws unmistakably on the old story, way back in Genesis 4. Almost at the beginning of the story. There’s a man there named Lamech and he really dramatically illustrates just how quickly things went wrong because of Adam and Eve’s sin. They disobeyed the Lord. It took only one generation before the first

murder happened when Cain killed Abel. From there everything goes from bad to worse and within five generations, or just a couple of sentences in the story, we’ve got Lamech, who writes the first recorded song—a song about his revenge. Some guy hit him, so Lamech responded by killing him and then he went home and serenaded his wives with this tale of vengeful manhood. And it shows how quickly and how horribly mankind fell from our vocation as God’s image-bearers, from being the priests of his temple. We’ve become unrepentant, murderous brawlers. And when we do start thinking that maybe this isn’t good and that we should probably be more merciful—the Jews knew this because the Lord’s mercy towards them had taught them—when we do start thinking we should be more merciful, we limit it. Three times? Is three times enough? No? Okay, surely seven times is enough? Seven is generous, right?

And Jesus says, “No. I’m inaugurating God’s new creation. I’m going to set everything to rights, I’m going to undo Cain and Lamech and all the evil that followed them. If Lamech represents the present evil age with his seventy times seven vengefulness, Jesus’ new creation is going to a place where men and women forgive seventy times seven times. It’s a complete reversal, a complete change of ways and thinking about human relationships. It’s a world in which God gives his own son to die for the sake of his enemies and his people, and knowing that reconciling grace, we live it out joyfully and generously in our own relationships—not grudgingly, as in “Is seven times enough?”

And then, as you might expect, Jesus tells Peter a story to drive this point home. This begins at 18:23. “So you see, the kingdom of heaven is like a human king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he was beginning to sort it all out, one servant was brought before him who owed ten thousand talents. He had no means of paying it back, so the master ordered him to be sold with his wife and children and everything he possessed, and payment to be made.

“So the servant fell down and prostrated himself to him, saying, ‘Be patient with me and I will pay you everything!’

“The master had pity on the servant, let him off, and forgave the debt.”

“But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He seized him and began to throttle him, ‘Pay me back what you owe me!’ he said.

“The fellow servant fell down and begged him, ‘Be patient with me and I’ll pay you.’

“But he refused and went and threw him into prison until he could pay the debt.

“So when his fellow servants saw what had happened, they were very upset. They went and informed their master all that had happened. Then his master summoned him.

“‘You wicked servant!’ he said to him, ‘I let you off the whole debt because you begged me. Shouldn’t you have taken pity on your fellow servant as I took pity on you?’

“His master was angry and handed him over to the torturers, until he had paid the whole debt.” And then, picture Jesus looking Peter in the eye as he goes on: “And that’s what my heavenly Father will do to you, unless each of you forgives your brother [or sister] from your heart!”

I expect Peter’s reaction was the same as most people’s today when they hear this story. Okay, wow, the master was super gracious with his servant. Ten thousand talents was an absurd amount of money. Jesus talking about “ten thousand” talents would be like someone today talking about “a gazillion dollars”. It’s like the national debt: you can’t ever pay it back. You have to wonder what kind of guy this servant was in order to rack up that kind of debt—and it seems that somehow he did it without his master knowing it was happening. So knowing he’d never get his money back, the best the master could do was sell this servant into slavery, along with his family and

everything he owned. It wouldn’t get him his gazillion dollars back, but it was better than nothing. And yet, when the servant pleaded with him, the master had compassion. Real compassion. He didn’t force the man to sell his possessions to pay back part of the debt. He didn’t come up with a plan to garnish his wages. He just forgave the whole thing. Done. Free and clear. Imagine how you’d feel. The relief. The joy. The *gratitude*.

But not this guy. Even though his master forgave the debt, he’s angry for being reminded of the debt in the first place and he’s angry for being reminded that he was in over his head and that the only way to get out was by his master’s good graces. We’ve met people like that. The gospel’s message of forgiveness ought to bring us joy, but some people’s hearts are so hard and their pride so strong, the idea that they can’t pay their debt themselves just makes them angry. That’s this guy. So he goes stomping out of the master’s presence and on his way home to kick the dog and yell at his wife, he runs into one of his fellow servants. We get a sense of what a sleazy wheeler-dealer he is. Not only has he racked up a crazy debt himself, but he’s making loans to other people—probably from the money he borrowed from his master. This fellow servant owes him a hundred denarii. That’s a reasonable amount—about a hundred days wages. The first guy owed the national debt. This other guy owes the price of a used car. And the first servant, with his huge debt forgiven, well, there’s no reason to collect on the second. He no longer needs the money to pay back his master. When he saw his fellow servant, he should have run up to him with a big smile, “Hey! Guess what. I’m feeling magnanimous today. Forget about the money you owe me.” But instead, all this greedy jerk can think about is filling his own pockets even fuller than they already are. Those hundred denarii are now his, so he grabs his fellow servant by the throat, starts throttling him, and demands the money. And, just as he had pleaded with the master, this guy pleads with him using almost exactly the same words. But instead of

showing mercy, the first servant has his fellow servant thrown into prison.

It was scandalous. Jesus’ story was purposefully over the top. They usually were. But it really did drive the point home. Merciless vengeance? That’s the world of people like Lamech. But here’s the thing. The world where people will only forgive a brother or sister three times—or even seven times? The world where you forgive up to a point and then demand your pound of flesh? That’s also the world of people like Lamech. The world where I grit my teeth and say, “No one’s gonna walk all over me!” That’s the world of Lamech, too. The world of Lamech is a world of darkness. It’s the world out of which the Lord had called Abraham. It’s the world out of which the Lord had rescued Israel when he delivered them from Pharaoh’s bondage. So that they could be a light in the midst of that darkness, a light that would draw the nations to the Lord and to his life. And that world of Lamech, it’s that world that Jesus came set to rights. And Jesus didn’t come to set it right by killing all the Lamechs. He came to set it right by forgiving all the Lamechs, to die on a cross and pay the blood-debt of all the Lamechs with his own blood. He came to teach all the Lamech’s grace and to fill them with his Spirit so that they would understand and know and reciprocate that grace. So that God’s grace would overflow from them and begin a cascade of forgiveness and healing and reconciliation in the world.

And that, I think, explains Jesus’ explanation. He ends the story with the angry master throwing the servant into prison—to the torturers as some translations put it—because the idea is a merciless jailor who will somehow extract every last cent from whoever is entrusted to their devices. I don’t know how that works and I don’t really want to. It’s just bad. And Jesus says, “*That’s* what my heavenly Father will do to you unless each of you forgives his brother or sister from your heart.”

And that’s where some people struggle with this. Not the parable. The parable makes sense. But that God will revoke or somehow withhold his forgiveness

from us if we don't ourselves forgive. That gets some people's hackles up. And yet it's not the first or only time Jesus says something like this. Think of the Lord's prayer. He teaches us to pray, "Forgive us as we forgive our debtors." And, again, that bothers some people. But it shouldn't. Not if we remember that bigger story of God's redemption and not if we stop and think about forgiveness itself.

So let's think about the latter first—about the nature of forgiveness. Some of God's gifts don't depend on us at all. He can and does give them to us regardless of our attitude or standing before him. But forgiveness is different. Think of it like breathing. When I started swimming competitively in grade school, one of the first things I had to learn was how to breathe. There's some instinct in human beings that when you put your face in the water, you want to hold your breath. And so you see all the young kids swimming along and when they raise their arm and turn their head to breathe, that's when they exhale and then gasp for another breath of air before putting their face back in the water. You can hear them: loudly exhaling and then gasping for air. But that doesn't work. There isn't enough time to do both while your head is turned. So you have to learn to exhale when your face is in the water, so that your lungs will be free to inhale—not gasp, but naturally inhale—when you turn your head. Learn to do that: exhale in the water, then turn your head and inhale, and you can go forever. But if you won't give up that oxygen when your face is in the water, you won't be able to inhale the oxygen you need when you turn your head. You'll be out of breath in a length or two. Forgiveness is like breathing. If you can't give it, you can't receive it. A couple of weeks ago we heard the beatitudes. Jesus' list there starts with being poor in spirit. Brothers and Sisters, you've got to be empty—and know it—before God can fill you. That, and God's forgiveness doesn't stand alone. It's not a gift that's given for its own sake. God's forgiveness serves a purpose. And that's why we need to

understand this in the context of the whole big story of redemption.

Right from the beginning, God has had a purpose—a *vocation*—for his people. Adam and Eve were the priests of his temple called to steward creation and, while they were at it, to be fruitful and multiply. If they'd done that, if they'd been faithful to that stewardship and been fruitful, it would have meant the growth and expansion of the temple until it filled the earth. Sound familiar? It should sound like the Prophet Habakkuk's words of hope about the glory of the Lord covering the earth as the waters cover the sea. And so when God set out to redeem his creation that has been corrupted by human rebellion and sin, he called and saved a people to be his means of restoring humanity and creation. He poured out his grace on Israel and set her up to be a light to the nations. And when Israel failed, he sent his own son to be a faithful Israelite, to die and to shed his blood and to rise again in order to create a new Israel, a new people and this time he filled that people with his Spirit as the Lord had promised to do through the Prophets. And this people, forgiven by Jesus and filled with God's Spirit, have been called and equipped to take his kingdom to the world, to be light in the darkness, to proclaim the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection, to announce that he is the world's true Lord, until his enemies have been defeated and God's glory is known throughout the earth as the waters cover the sea.

And on that last day, whatever is left of evil, of sin, and even death itself—all the intractable Lamechs, unwilling to breathe out that God might breathe into them—all of it will be destroyed as everyone in Jesus the Messiah and even creation itself are resurrected and made new and God's new creation comes in all its glory—as heaven and earth and God and human beings are once again united.

But in the meantime, Brothers and Sisters, you and I—the people of Jesus and the Spirit—are God's means of making known his glory—as we proclaim the death and resurrection of

Jesus and as we live out the life of the Spirit that anticipates his new creation—and not for our own sake, but for the life of the world. When we embrace Jesus, when we empty ourselves and let him breathe his life and his forgiveness into us, he forgives our debt and reconciles us to God. He even fills us with his Spirit and makes us his temple. And the natural result of that, should be a grateful joy that first fills the church with the same forgiving and reconciling love. But then that joy and that desire to share the reconciling love of God in Jesus cascades out from the church to the world—as we forgive and share God's grace in our families, in our community, in our neighbourhoods and schools and workplaces and shops and as we drive our cars and ride our bikes, in our board meetings and city councils and legislatures and parliaments—as Jesus' people bring God's grace into places of conflict and brokenness. Is it an easy task? No. But it begins here. Come to the Table this morning. Eat the bread and drink the wine. Remember what Jesus has done for us at the cross. Participate in his forgiveness anew. And as you go out, don't let it fade. Meditate on what Jesus has done for you. Keep exhaling yourself that he might breathe his life into you. And then take his life-giving breath to the world.

Let's pray: Keep, O Lord, your household the Church steadfast in godliness; that through your protection, it may be free from all adversities, and may devoutly serve you in good works, to the glory of your name, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*