



Proper 19, The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
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September 13, 2020

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

An old moonshiner is on his deathbed and he calls for three of his friends to come and see him. When they get there, he begins to confess his sins.

“Cleetus,” he says to the first friend, “do you remember when you got arrested back in ’65 for making ‘shine? It was me who turned you in, please forgive me.”

And Cleetus says, “that was a long time ago, I forgive you.”

Then the moonshiner says to his second friend,

“Jed, do you remember when you got arrested back in ’71 for running ‘shine to Atlanta? It was me who turned you in, please forgive me.”

And Jed says, “since you’re truly sorry, I’ll forgive you.”

Finally, the old moonshiner turns to his last friend and says,

“Jack, do you remember back in ’83 when they caught you red handed with your still runnin’? It was me that told them where to find you, please forgive me.

And Jack said, “remember? Why do think I poisoned you?”

Forgiveness is never as easy as it sounds, is it? In today’s story from the Gospel, Jesus points us to how challenging it can be to both give and receive forgiveness. Just when we might think we’re figuring it out, we find that life presents all sorts of new challenges to our ability to experience forgiveness.

There’s one particular line in today’s story that I think is significant and may help us better understand what Jesus is telling us. When the king comes to the slave who owes him ten thousand talents, the equivalent of about ten million dollars today, the slave says “have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.” Jesus says that the king took pity on him and forgave the debt.

I believe the key to understanding why that slave was so unforgiving of the one who owed him money is to be found in that one phrase with which he begged the king: “Have patience with me, *and I will pay you everything.*” The slave did not understand what real forgiveness is, he believed that he had earned forgiveness by offering to pay the debt eventually. He failed to understand that the king’s forgiveness flowed from the king’s compassionate heart, not from the king’s willingness to enter into some kind of bargain with the slave. After all, such a bargain would be ridiculous. If the slave doesn’t have the ten million dollars when it’s due, he’s not going to somehow magically produce it at a later date. The debt is absurdly large and absurdly unpayable.

The only way out of the situation is for the king, out of compassion and kindness, to write the debt off. The slave goes away from the encounter believing that he has earned forgiveness and therefore he does not have the heart of compassion and kindness to forgive others.

What about us? Do we ever believe that we have earned forgiveness? Such a misunderstanding can arise in many ways. We might think that God has forgiven us because our sins aren’t so bad, or because we repented in the right way at the right time, or because we’ve turned our lives around and started living in a better way. Jesus warns us that the misconception that we have earned forgiveness from God can have serious consequences in our relationship with God and with others.

If we misunderstand God’s forgiveness; if we believe that God forgives us because of what we do, instead of understanding that God forgives because of who God is and what God’s heart is like, then we run the risk of not being able to extend forgiveness to others.

And that, Jesus warns us, is an extremely dangerous place to be. Because not forgiving other people is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die. Our unforgiveness hurts us and traps us in a place of torture where we aren’t able to move forward with our lives.

God forgives us because of who God is. Forgiveness and reconciliation are intrinsic properties of the life of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But God does not take away our free will by forcing us to forgive others. In fact, Jesus warns us in the final line of our reading today, that God will allow us to torture ourselves with unforgiveness if that is how we choose to live.

God will allow it, but it is not God’s desire for us. Jesus invites us into a way of living that is far more joyful, far more compassionate, and far more beautiful than the narrow world of unforgiveness and holding

grudges. Jesus invites us to see ourselves as forgiven and beloved of God and then, from that place of un-earned, freely given forgiveness, he invites us to begin to forgive others and share this new life with them.

May we have the wisdom, strength, and compassion to do so.

Amen.