

“Faith to Forgive” Psa 103, Gen. 50:15–21, Matt 18:21–35 Pentecost 15A 9-17-17

If you think Old Testament is Law and New Testament is Gospel, today’s lessons dispel that myth. The Psalm and Genesis reveal heartfelt forgiveness. Matthew and Romans warn against unforgiving and judgmental hearts. What blessings are found when we forgive. How tragic it is if we don’t.

God himself both exemplifies and empowers us to forgive. What He commands, He himself does. In Psalm 103, forgiveness is the first benefit from God for which we bless His holy name. And why not? It redeems our lives from the pit.

What a pit it is to fear punishment, as did Joseph’s brothers. They had kept him in a pit until they could sell him to slave traders on the way to Egypt. Then, they lied to their father that a wild animal had killed him. Their spiritual pit was deeper than the one in which they put Joseph. It grew deeper as time passed without them confessing their sin. In that same time, God was preparing Joseph to forgive them out of their pit.

Sin is a debt that we cannot repay as we see in Jesus’ parable of the two servants. **READ Matt 18:23-26.**

The pit of guilt is more than a bad feeling. It is not being able to fix or undo what you did wrong or repay a debt. It is holding onto regret about earlier decisions made out of anger, lust, boredom, or poor judgment.

While there is no way to undo past sins or recover lost chances, there is God’s forgiveness: His crown of love and mercy that restores us and revives our spirits.

Today’s Psalm tells us that God gives mercy and grace because it is who He is. He IS merciful and gracious. He IS slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

Likewise, Joseph forgave because of who he had become by the grace of God that showed him kindness and gave him authority. He asked, “Am I in the place of God?” Though he did have power to punish his brothers, he chose to imitate God’s mercy, not God’s judgment.

However, the first servant in Jesus’ parable was different.

READ Matt 18:27-33.

The servant whose huge debt the master forgave did not forgive another servant a much smaller debt because of who He was: “*wicked servant*”, his master called him. He exposed his wickedness by refusing to forgive.

Whether or not we forgive reflects what is in our heart. If it is full of God’s forgiveness, we will follow his example, and by his power, we will forgive. Refusing to forgive shows a heart empty of faith in Christ’s forgiveness on the cross.

If we say we do not need the cross, we reveal hearts of sinful pride. If we claim that the cross was not enough, our faith is replaced by the fear that we cannot do enough to be saved. When pride and fear replace faith, we live by law, not grace, and become unforgiving of others. What is not done in faith is sin. Thus Jesus has the master warn the servant and us: **READ Matt 18:34-35.**

In his first letter, John connects love of neighbor to faith in Christ: *By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him?”*

What spiritual good do we need more than forgiveness? If we close our heart to a brother or sister in need of forgiveness, how can we say God’s love abides in us? If love does not show up in our forgiving each other, then does it really exist?

Jesus said that the greatest love we can have is to lay down our life for another. He did that for us that His sacrifice would remove us from the pit of guilt for our sins of yesterday, today and tomorrow.

From today’s Psalm, forgiveness means that God’s anger is over. He does not treat as our sins deserve. We cannot fathom the breadth or depth of God’s love or how far from us He has removed our sins.

That should also describe our forgiveness to one another. Jesus told the parable because Peter asked Him how often he should forgive someone who sins against him. Up to seven times? Jesus multiplied that by 10, meaning that true forgiveness is total and endless. We are not to measure it by quantity or quality, though our sinful nature always tempts us to do exactly that, as Peter did. (NOTE cartoon on p.7 of the bulletin.) Let us pray:

“Yes, Lord, have mercy and give us faith that moves and empowers us to forgive as we have been forgiven. Save us from the burden of keeping score. As you have rescued us from our pits of shame and guilt, so help us to pull others out of their pits by your mercy and compassion. In your forgiving name we pray. Amen”.