



# Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

## September 13, 2020

\* *Please stand if you are able*

### Gathering

Welcome and Lighting the Christ Candle

Acolyte: May the Holy Spirit unite us in worship, point us toward Jesus Christ, and inspire us to love mercy, do justice, and walk humbly with God. Come, let us worship God.

\* Liturgist: When Israel came out of Egypt, Judah became God's sanctuary, Israel his dominion.

**All:** **The sea looked and fled, the Jordan turned back; the mountains leaped like rams, the hills like lambs.**

Liturgist: Why was it, sea, that you fled? Why, Jordan, did you turn back? Why, mountains and hills, did you leap?

**All:** **Tremble earth, at the presence of the Lord, who turned the rock into a pool, the hard rock into springs of water.** *Psalm 114*

**All Singing:** **43 "Guide Me, O My Great Redeemer"**

Minister: To God's people gathered in hope: Grace to you, mercy and peace, from God our Creator and Christ our Redeemer, through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

**All:** **Amen.**

Passing the Peace at a Distance

## Reconciliation

Liturgist: The angel of God, who had been traveling in front of Israel's army, withdrew and went behind them. The pillar of cloud also moved from in front and stood behind, coming between the armies of Egypt that were pursuing Israel. Through the night the cloud brought darkness to one side and light to the other; so neither went near the other all night long.

**All: Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night the Lord drove the sea back with a strong wind and turned it into dry land. The waters were divided and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left.**

*Exodus 14: 19-20*

Liturgist: Lord just as you delivered Israel so to deliver us.

**All: Deliver us from fear and flimsy faith, deliver us from indifference and self-absorption, deliver us from sin that weighs us down and sin that we hardly notice.**

Liturgist: Lord have mercy; forgive us our sins even as we forgive those who sin against us.

*Silent confession and reflection*

Liturgist: If you declare with your mouth that "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. As scripture says, "Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame."

**People: For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile – the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."**

*Romans 10: 9-13*

\* **All Singing: 693 "Amazing Grace (My Chains are Gone)"**  
*Singing verses 1-4, singing refrain after 2 and 4*

The Baptism of John Owen "Jack" Riley IV (10:15 AM)

Minister: Having heard God's gracious promises to us in Christ, do you desire that John Owen be baptized?

Parents: We do.

**All: With joy we celebrate together the gift of God's grace in Christ!**

Minister: In presenting your child for baptism, desiring that John Owen be grafted into Christ as a member of his body do you receive the teachings of the Christian faith, which we confess in the Creeds of the church?

Parents: Yes! We trust in him as our Lord and Savior. We intend to be Christ's faithful disciples, trusting in his promises, obeying his Word, honoring his church, and showing his love, with God's help as long as we shall live.

Minister: Will the congregation please stand and with these parents proclaim your faith using the words from the Apostle's Creed.

**All: I believe in God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, and born of the virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate; was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to hell. The third day he rose again from the dead. He ascended to heaven, and is seated at the right hand**

**of God the Father almighty. From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.**

**I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.**

Covenant Vows  
Prayer of Thanksgiving  
Baptism

Minister: Some of us will have the privilege of encouraging John Owen often, over the course of many years. Others of us may not be able to do so. Yet we all speak words of promise and welcome, speaking on behalf of Christ's whole church, in time and space, and committing ourselves to live lives of Christian encouragement wherever God calls us.

Brothers and sisters, we now receive John Owen into Christ's church. I charge you to nurture and love him and to assist him to be Christ's faithful disciple.

**All: With joy and thanksgiving, we now welcome you, John Owen, into Christ's church; for we are all one in Christ. We promise to love, encourage, and support you and to help you know and follow Christ.**

Soloist: "In the Water" Jim Hofman

In the water He claims us, with his promise he saves us, children of His love. Born for His purpose, grace poured out to us, His blessing from above.

Jesus our brother, one like no other, come bless our little babe.  
We offer to You, our hands of love, to grow and guide them on your way.

Show us the way to share past today, with John Owen as he grows.  
Help us to model the way that we ought to, your spirit in this place.

Jesus our brother, one like no other, come bless our little babe.  
We offer to You, our hands of love, to grow and guide them on your way.

In the water he claims us, in the water he claims us, in the water he claims us.

## Proclamation

**All: Lord God, may your Word be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.**

Scripture: Matthew 18: 21-35

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?"

Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

"Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

"At this the servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

"But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded.

“His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.’

“But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

“Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

“This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

Minister: The Word of the Lord.

**All: Thanks be to God.**

Sermon: Arithmetic of the Kingdom

\* **All Singing: 638 “Forgive Our Sins as We Forgive”**

## Dedication

Prayers of the People (9:00 AM)

\* Benediction

\* **All Singing: 938 “My Friends, May You Grow in Grace”**

Praying with Elders – If you have a concern or joy that you’d like to talk or pray about with an Elder, one or two will be available in the shade near the sanctuary entrance following the service.

### Worship Leaders

Pianist/Vocalist: Erin Pacheco  
Sound Engineer: Schuyler Roozeboom  
Minister: Roger Nelson

#### 9:00 AM Service

Liturgist: Emily Bosscher  
Prayer: Arlo Compaan  
Vocalist: Emily Bosscher

#### 10:15 AM Service

Liturgist: Annelise Latham  
Vocalist: Chris Gabrielse  
Soloist: David Hofman  
Percussion: Paul Mulchrone

Hymns are from “Lift Up Your Hearts” (Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2013)

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Text: Matthew 18: 21-35  
Title: Arithmetic of the Kingdom  
Date: 09.13.20  
Roger Allen Nelson

How many times should you forgive?  
What would you do to forgive or be forgiven?  
How far would you go to forgive someone?

Consider the story of Alvin Straight.

At 73 years old, Alvin, a retired Iowa farmer with cataracts, bad hips, two canes, a propensity for bad cigars and fourteen children – seven of whom survived – learned that his brother, Lyle, suffered a stroke on his farm in Mount Zion, Wisconsin. And, although they were once as close as brothers could be, they hadn't spoken for more than a decade. They were estranged from one another with a chasm as wide as the Iowa sky between them.

So, afraid that life was reaching low ebb, with emphysema setting up shop in his lungs, Alvin acknowledged that the time to settle up accounts was running short. He said, "I want to sit with him and look up at the stars like we used to, long ago." And, with that spirit, this crusty-old-codger climbed aboard the only thing he could still drive, his riding lawn mower, and he set out for Wisconsin.

The first lawnmower barely got him out of town before it broke down. So, Alvin had it towed home, shot it, as if it were a horse, and then with his Social Security check bought a 1966 John Deere riding lawn mower. Towing a covered trailer full of wieners and camping gear, he again turned his face to the east and headed for Wisconsin.

Puttering along the berm at a stately six miles an hour he traveled some 300 miles across the top of Iowa. It was a slow journey. One doesn't drive a lawnmower to Wisconsin quickly. Alvin was on the road for five weeks – a geriatric knight on a quest with his trusty motorized steed as his only companion. He ventured forth to forgive and be forgiven....

Hollywood captured this story in the movie, "The Straight Story."  
They couldn't make up something so absurdly full of life and grace.

How many times should you forgive?  
What would you do to forgive or be forgiven?  
How far would you go to forgive someone?

In our text bumbling-irrepressible Peter asks Jesus the same: How far should I go? How many times should I forgive someone who sins against me?

What's often lost in the popular reading of this text is its context. Immediately preceding this exchange Jesus tells the parable of the shepherd leaving the ninety-nine to search for the one last lost sheep and then he offers a practical four-step process to settle disputes among his called-out-followers that ends with the offender being treated as if he or she were a "pagan or a tax collector." The same ones with whom Jesus shared meals and kept company.

Then, the very next thing Peter asks is, "So how many times shall I forgive someone who sins against me?"

The text doesn't give any indication if this was all part of the same conversation or if Matthew is simply stacking up the teachings of Jesus regarding our common life. But again, even as God pursues us, Jesus offers a way of being  
that's rooted in a different allegiance,  
that turns things on their heads,  
that seems outlandish, irrational, inconceivable.

If the preceding text is Jesus at his practical best this is Jesus at his impractical worst.

Because, Peter – proud as can be – asks about forgiveness and suggests the fullness of seven times. He thinks he's scoring points with Jesus. Only to be trumped by the absurdity of seventy-seven or seventy times seven.

Jesus responds with a figure of speech that suggests something beyond what we can count, and in doing so references the memory of Lamech. In Genesis 4, Lamech (a descendent of the murderer, Cain) boasts to his wives of his code of revenge. In his words:

*I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for injuring me.  
If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy times seven.*

Lamech offers the arithmetic of the world: An eye for eye and a tooth for a tooth, a pound of flesh for an ounce of offense. Lamech would go to untold ends to settle the score. If wronged he would get even. His would be the last word. But, Jesus turns the tables on Peter,  
on Lamech,  
on all of us....

Rather than balance the books unlimited times, Jesus commands his followers to forgive unlimited times. Rather than grab for revenge, Jesus commands his disciples to offer forgiveness. The followers of Jesus are to be so generous of spirit as to forgive beyond their ability to count. Jesus offers the arithmetic of the kingdom.

But, that has to be hyperbole, doesn't it? Jesus can't mean forgiveness for the really hard and hurtful stuff in life. He must be talking about the petty offenses that happen among believers: rudeness, gossip, a mean word, a cold shoulder. He doesn't give us a process or guidelines for how to be reconciled.

Surely, he's not talking about forgiveness for dictators or terrorists.  
Surely, he's not suggesting forgiveness of the abuser.  
Surely, he's talking about forgiveness for those already forgiven.

Right?

Imagine the cloud that crossed Peter's face. He thought he was going to impress Jesus; only to be staggered by the jaw dropping absurdity of forgiveness beyond measure.

So, Jesus, seeing the trouble in Peter's face, launches into a colorful cartoon where the circumstances and scales are overblown. . . .

The king was keeping books and the servant owed something like a bazillion dollars. The servant offers to pay it back on time. Think: a dollar a day on the national debt. He might as well drive a lawn mower from Iowa to the southern tip of Argentina.

Except, the king looks with mercy on the man and forgives his debt. Scott free. Every last penny. Wiped clean. Good to go. No interest, not points, no penalties, no threats, no recrimination, no keeping track. Free!  
Thanks be to God.

Dear friends, we have all been wronged.

And, any tension or expectation in a sermon about forgiveness is lost because we know the ending – we're supposed to forgive. But, we also know that there are hurts too deep, evil too profound, and the demands for revenge or justice are limitless. So, the words of Jesus seem like pious platitudes that don't take in to account the real world.

But, Tom Long writes that the parable is about proportion. In his words:

*When one gets a sense of proportion, a sense of the size of our sinful debt and the immensity of God's mercy, then no one would dare attempt to ration forgiveness. We know too well that the little boat in which we are sailing is floating on a deep sea of grace and that forgiveness is not dispensed with an eyedropper but a fire hose.*

It is a wonderful image. The mercy of God is beyond our measure; who then are we to squeeze out forgiveness only when our standards are met, and our needs are satisfied, and our books are balanced?

I've lost track of how many weddings I've done. Sometimes I'll see a young couple and I can't remember if I did their wedding or not. But, in my mushy memory there are moments of great humor and beauty that stand out. One of those moments was a wedding in Holland, Michigan in which the bride's cousin read a portion of I Corinthians 13. Typical wedding fare, except the cousin was a young Korean boy with Down's Syndrome. He was nervous. His speech was halting. The words were hard to understand. He couldn't have been any cuter. His heart was wide open. And, he read:

*Love keeps no record of wrongs.*

There wasn't a dry eye in the room.

Dear friends, what if forgiveness isn't really about number or distance?  
What if forgiveness isn't about arithmetic? To count, to keep track, isn't really forgiveness.

Forgiveness isn't waiting for a final ledger.  
Forgiveness isn't holding the IOU waiting to balance the books.  
Forgiveness isn't burying the hatchet, but putting a marker on the site.  
Forgiveness is limitless, because it doesn't keep track.

Love keeps no record of wrongs.

If we're loved and forgiven by God, with our sins erased on a cross, isn't it possible that others are too? And as God's love in Christ keeps no record of our wrongs, isn't it possible that we would see others with a similar generosity?

Debt is really about power.

If I hold you in debt; I hold power over you. And forgiveness, therefore, is about giving up power, letting go of the upper hand. In forgiving we make ourselves vulnerable, we give up self for the sake of the other, for the sake of the relationship, for the sake of love.

Alvin Straight was finally moved by love.

There was no rehashing of wrongs.  
There was no tit for tat.  
There was no scramble for the last winning word.  
There was the simple recognition that finally forgiveness is wider than the Iowa sky. And at the end of the journey two brothers sat on the porch and looked up at the stars, and you would want to make the night last forever.

So, this morning we're reminded that the grace and love of God forgives sin beyond measure. And, as that is true...

Maybe there's a lawnmower we can start up.  
Maybe there's a sister or a brother we can forgive.  
Maybe there's a debt we can release.  
Maybe there's a baby we can baptize.

Amen.