Sermon 9-13-26
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My dear friends, grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Today is the sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Rally Sunday,and there will be ice cream after the service. It's a good day.

We heard some numbers tossed around in today's second scripture reading. I'd like to start today with some numbers that are important to me, if you don't mind.

Two: Last spring I shared with you that i was starting a seminary program to earn a Certificate in Proclamation. I am currently halfway through the program: 2 classes down, 2 to go. Ten: that's how many days until our daughter's due date. Dave and I are going to be grandparents literally any day now. Five.

Our son Tim, from the moment he could talk, has always had a way with words. I remember very clearly a day when he was about three years old, or maybe even younger. He looked at me, gave a big sigh, and said, "Mama, I love you *five*." Now that might not make a lot of sense if you don't happen to speak the language that my very little boy was speaking at that time. But I understood perfectly because I'd heard him use the expression before. An expression of his own creation, an absolute linguistic masterpiece spoken as only a three year old can. You see, in Tim's language, "five" meant a lot. More than he could quantify. An overwhelming hugeness. For him to tell me he loved me five was him telling me that his little baby heart was full to overflowing, and I was the blessed recipient of that unimaginable measure of his love. I was humbled, and of course I told him I loved him five as well.

They say that numbers don't lie, but context matters. In my first year of teaching, some students asked me how old I was. In the foolishness of my youth I asked them to guess. They guessed 42, which was devastating since I was 24. Later on, when I knew better, I answered the question differently. Whenever my students wondered how old I was, I always answered that I was plenty-eight years old. The best part was watching their faces as they processed that one. Plenty-eight can be a very handy number.

In today's second scripture reading, Peter wanted to know how many times he should forgive someone who sinned against him. He knew very well that rabbis of the time generally advised forgiving a person three times for the same offense. Peter probably thought he was being generous when he suggested seven times. Jesus had other ideas, though, and told Peter that he should forgive seventy-seven times, or in some Bible translations, seventy times seven. While we're on the subject of numbers, Jesus' use of the number seven was no accident; in the Bible the number seven symbolizes perfection and completeness. Jesus knew how to work the numbers.

Just numbers. Numbers like five. Like plenty-eight. Like seven, or seventy-seven.

Both of today's scripture readings focus on forgiveness: first from Genesis and then from Matthew. Forgiveness is the conscious choice to let go of anger, bitterness, and resentment toward someone who has caused you harm in some way. Forgiveness means letting go of the need for revenge or retaliation.

Forgiveness doesn't mean forgetting hurtful words or actions. Forgiveness doesn't mean excusing inexcusable behavior. Forgiveness doesn't necessarily mean reconciliation if a relationship has broken down. Forgiveness is a deeply personal choice, and looks different for different people.

From the book of Matthew we heard the Parable of the Unforgiving Servant, in which a servant owed the king much more than he could ever repay. The actual amount of the debt was 10,000 talents, at a time when *ONE talent represented 15-20 years' wages for a daily wage worker.* Needless to say, this servant was probably not a daily wage worker but a high-level money handler whose shady practices may very well have been the reason he was enslaved to the king. This servant literally had no hope of ever repaying this debt, so the king proposed selling him and his family to recoup at least some of what he was owed–which in that time and place would not have been out of the ordinary. The debtor begged and pleaded for mercy, which to his surprise worked. The king showed compassion and canceled the debt, allowing the man to go free. If the story had ended there, it would have been a nice story of kindness and compassion on the part of the king. But that isn't the end: this same debtor, who had just been shown great mercy by the king, refused to show any compassion at all to a fellow servant who owed him a small amount of money. Instead of paying it forward and forgiving the small debt, he had this man thrown into prison. Apparently being on the receiving end of great mercy didn't inspire him to show mercy to anyone else. The king found out and the first servant, the forgiven one, got what he gave.

It doesn't take much of a stretch to realize that the benevolent king in this story is really God, and **we** are the debtors with the bill we can't possibly pay. **We** are the ones who receive forgiveness for that overwhelming debt of sin. **We** are the ones who are meant to respond to the gift of grace by showing forgiveness and mercy to others. *We are the ones who fail to forgive as we have been forgiven.*

Remember the "pay it forward" trend from a few years ago, when it was popular to pay for your own coffee in the drive thru but also pay for the car behind you? Is that still a thing?

Apparently not for everyone. A few years ago an actor gave an interview on TV. He had been given the platform to share his adamant view that his tax dollars should not fund social support programs, arguing that such programs encourage laziness and lack of responsibility. He described how he had been raised in severe poverty and how by his own hard work he had become a successful actor. In his own words, he had pulled himself up by his own bootstraps and thought others should do the same. At one point he ranted, and I quote, "I've been on food

stamps and welfare, did anyone help me out? No." He was roasted on social media for his hypocrisy.

A minute ago I offered the definition of forgiveness as choosing to let go of bitterness and anger, and setting aside the need for retaliation and revenge. That can be really hard to do; sometimes we just want to roll around in that bitterness and anger. We want to savor the flavor of plotting our comeback. Perhaps you've heard the old saying, "it's more important to be nice than to be right." I believe a better expression would be "it's more important to forgive than to be right." While we may have the ability to set aside our anger and our need to retaliate, we don't always have the desire. Jesus knew this, that's why He instructed us to forgive so many times. He knew we wouldn't always want to, so He spelled it out in plain language. He expects us to forgive as we have been forgiven.

Every Sunday we pray The Lord's Prayer in obedience to Jesus who taught it to His disciples. We ask God to forgive us our debts, **as we** forgive our debtors. On a side note, I was raised in the Lutheran church, and grew up asking God to forgive my trespasses as I forgave those who trespassed against me. Whenever I'm in a mixed crowd it's always a little awkward as to whether God will be asked to forgive our trespasses or our debts. We're fortunate that God doesn't get tangled up in vocabulary. Regardless, forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. I confess that because I memorized the prayer a long time ago I usually just let the familiar words flow. *As we forgive our debtors.*

As people of God we live knowing that Jesus paid our bill with His sacrifice on the cross, and we are free to start over every day with clean slates. It's important to note, though, that forgiveness does not take away accountability. This fresh start is an opportunity to make things right when we can, and offer forgiveness to those who have wronged us. When someone cuts you off in traffic, tap your brakes and let them into your lane. You don't have to like it but you *can* let it go. When someone elbows you aside to take the last box of glazers at Kwik Trip, let it go and grab a different treat. Again, you don't have to like it, but there could be a circumstance that you don't know about. An urgent donut emergency at home, maybe.

Let me be clear about one thing, though: by offering forgiveness I am not saying that we should give others permission to abuse us or treat us badly. Forgiveness also includes taking steps to protect ourselves and others from further mistreatment. We can forgive while at the same time resisting injury and breaking cycles of abuse. Some of Jesus' last words on the cross were "Father, forgive them; they don't know what they're doing."

After writing about half of this sermon, I had a brand new thought: WHY does Jesus tell us to forgive? What if Jesus instructs us to forgive more than seventy-seven times not only because we have been forgiven, but also simply for our own well-being? Think of a time when you were harmed in some way by someone else's words or actions. If you did not find it in your heart to forgive that person, the weight of holding onto that grievance becomes greater with every passing day. Or week, or month, or year. It would be like carrying around a big rock every day, refusing to put it down. Those bad feelings, that desire for revenge or retaliation take up so

much space in your mind and in your heart that it can be hard to find space for the thoughts and feelings that do matter. If you allow the person who wronged you to live rent-free in your head, they have great power over you–power that you have willingly given away. Holding on to the negativity and the hurt poisons your well-being, impacting not only yourself but how you interact with others. Jesus wants us to think and act with love and kindness toward ourselves and toward others. Forgiveness is a gift you give to yourself. Put down the rock.

I actually brought some rocks to church today, and after the service I will leave them right up front here. I invite anyone who is interested to come back into the sanctuary and pick one up. Either before or after you have your ice cream and visit the sign up fair. Hold the rock; feel the weight of it, the roughness of it, and imagine that that rock is the weight of all the grievances you carry in your heart. If you are ready to let those grievances go and set aside the anger and bitterness that go along with them, take a deep breath, open your heart, and then put the rock down. Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.

We have heard the words of scripture in which Jesus told us that we have a responsibility to forgive as we have been forgiven. In a little while we'll pray the Lord's Prayer together and I invite you to be mindful of the words we say as we ask for and offer forgiveness.

Beloved people of promise, as you walk through the coming week, open your eyes and heart to see the world not only as it is but as it *can be*. It really is more important to forgive than to be right. Forgive one another not seven times, not even seventy-seven times, but plenty-eight times. Know in every moment that you are loved. You are loved more than you can possibly imagine, without condition. You are loved ***five.*** Amen.