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Christ the King Lutheran Church – Cody, WY  
Twenty-second Sunday after Trinity  
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Text: Matthew 18:21–35

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

I did not grow up in the Lutheran Church. The preaching of the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins and the right administration of the Sacraments for the forgiveness of sins was not the day-by-day staple of my Christian experience. Don't misunderstand me. The churches I attended as a boy and into adulthood believed the Bible, loved Jesus, preached about His death and resurrection, and held a lively and fervent hope for eternal life at the end of the age. The forgiveness of sins was certainly preached. Christ died to forgive and save us!

But the forgiveness of sins wasn't the main thing. It was necessary. But it was preached in such a way that once your sins were forgiven, you could move on to the more important things like living the Christian life, raising Christian families, following principles of Biblical money management, pursuing social justice, and advancing the kingdom of God on earth. Again, those are wonderful things. The Bible teaches us to pursue them, each in their proper place and order. The problem with this kind of thinking was the forgiveness of sins wasn't the sum and substance of the Christian's life.

Let me illustrate. I remember the very first time I heard a Lutheran pastor say, "... in the stead and by the command of my Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." I was scandalized! I was downright angry. Who does this man think he is to forgive my sin?! Sure, he can tell me how to spend money, how to be a godly husband, and how to raise my kids, but to forgive my sins. No. That he could not do. Only God can do that.

So in a strange twist of theological thinking, the importance of the gospel of the forgiveness of sins was relegated to the private recesses of my heart, mind, and

soul. Those things I had to take care of with God, and God alone. Pastors certainly preached about forgiveness, they encouraged everyone to receive it by faith. But the Church and her called servants could not actually give forgiveness.

Today's gospel reading from Matthew 18 presents very differently. Jesus brings the need to receive the forgiveness of sins and the need to give the forgiveness of sins to the forefront of our lives and the life of the holy Christian Church. The forgiveness of sins is to have the primary place in how we think about God and how we think about one another. Vs. 35 records our Lord's conclusion, "So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

What does God the Father require of us? As we have been forgiven our sins by the mercy and love Christ Jesus, so we too are to forgive those who sin against us. If we refuse to receive such forgiveness and to share that forgiveness with one another, then we shall be cast out from His holy presence into the darkness of judgment and eternal death. Being a godly husband and father, a virtuous and just citizen, and using all the resources entrusted to us in a godly way are all important, exceedingly important. But they are of secondary importance. What is most important is receiving, sharing, and living in the forgiveness of sins given to us through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Receiving what Christ wants to give us must be the most important thing in our lives as well as in the ministry of His Church.

Our Lord's teaching in today's gospel text began with an important and practical question asked by the apostle Peter (vs. 21), "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Peter's question is a good question. But it makes an assumption: forgiveness is limited. This is the mistake most of us make. There must be a limit on the quality and quantity of forgiveness.

In addition to this mistaken assumption, there is a deep fear that all of us share. It goes something like this ... If I truly forgive people freely and completely,

without limits, then I will be abused, cheated, and mistreated. Forgiveness must be limited. So, “as many as seven times?”

Notice our Lord’s response in vs. 22, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.” Our Lord is saying that Peter’s thinking about forgiveness is way off base. Forgiveness is not about keeping a ledger sheet of offenses whether that be 7 sins or 490 sins. Did not the psalmist declare, “If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared” (Psalm 130:4-5). The perfectly holy God does not mark iniquity for those who fear, love, and trust in Him. That is why we cling to Him with such devotion. He is the God who is love. We are able to stand before Him because He forgives.

So to keep track of sins at all doesn’t fit with what our Lord and the entire Bible means by the forgiveness of sins. To forgive someone their sins means to release them, completely and fully, from the guilt and punishment of their sins. Those sins are no longer held against them. Consider these two Bible passages:

For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us (Psalm 103:11-12).

King David wrote those words. He knew his sins. And the consequences of those sinful actions remained his entire life. But the Lord God of heaven and earth forgive David his many sins; they were removed from him. So the Lord removes our sins from us, as far as the east is from the west.

Listen to the prophet Micah.

Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love. He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea (Micah 7:18-19).

The God we worship and adore delights in steadfast love. And because He loves, He forgives. Our iniquities are no longer able to harm us. For the Lord casts them away from us to the depths of the sea. They aren't coming back.

The Lord Jesus teaches us about this infinite character of forgiveness in the parable from Mathew 18. A king discovered that one of his servants was indebted to him for ten thousand talents. Jesus is using an impossible number to illustrate the nature of forgiveness. It would take a servant or day laborer about 20 years to earn a single talent. Some how this servant accrued a debt worth about 200,000 years of work. It's an exaggerated, impossible number used to make a point. This servant could not have actually accumulated such a debt. And he certainly could not have paid it off with his own resources.

But here's the shocking truth this number teaches us. We have an impossibly large debt we owe to God. We cannot pay it back. Not in 200,000 years. Not in eternity itself. We sinners have an infinite sin debt because every sin is an infinite offense against the infinitely holy and righteous God. We must understand this truth or the Christian Gospel doesn't make any sense. We have sinned against God. There is no atonement or good work possible that we can do or achieve. It's simply impossible and hopeless.

But not for God. This is the great glory and mystery revealed in Holy Scripture. For our God is not only infinitely holy, righteous, and pure, but He is also love. Through the incarnation of God the Father's Son, and by His perfectly righteous life, and because of His blood shed exclusively for the purpose of forgiving the impossible debt of every human being who will ever live, we sinners are forgiven all our sins. They are removed from us because of Jesus. The crosses with which we adorn our churches and wear on our bodies are the constant, perpetual reminder that God loves so much that He forgives our sins even though we do not deserve such love and mercy.

This is the Christian gospel. As we have freely and fully received such forgiveness (remember that impossible number – 10,000 talents), so we forgiven Christians seek to forgive those who sin against us. We pray for this everyday in

the Lord's Prayer. "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." The forgiveness of sins permeates into our day to day lives.

People sin against us. They are represented by the 100 denarii, 100-days wages owed by another servant to the servant who was forgiven 10,000 talents. 100 denarii is a significant debt. But it isn't anything like the 10,000-talent debt we owe to God. And as God has forgiven us so wondrously and completely, so we too gladly forgive those who sin against us. We don't earn forgiveness by forgiving. God forbid. We can forgive each other rightly because we have first been forgiven completely by God Himself through Christ.

This is why the forgiveness of sins must have the priority in our lives. Through the forgiveness we receive through faith in Christ, we can forgive one another. Only in this complete, divine forgiveness can we be faithful and godly spouses, pious parents, virtuous citizens, and so forth. Our entire, day by day Christian life flows from the forgiveness of sins given to us by Christ Jesus. We are the 10,000 talent forgiven Christians ready to forgive those 100 denarii sinners who sin against us.

Dear saints of God, this is why the Gospel must be preached in our churches without compromise. Though it once angered me, the absolution I speak at the beginning of the service is now one of the most precious and important moments imaginable. A man authorized by Christ Himself proclaims the forgiveness Jesus won for the world by His death and resurrection. This is why we baptize our children and all adult converts. They need the forgiveness of sins. And this is why we offer the Lord's Supper every Sunday. We need His body and blood given and shed for the forgiveness of our sins. Everything we do in this congregation is to be oriented toward sinners receiving forgiveness, life, and salvation. Our Sunday school, Bible classes, our preschool, LWML, the various boards, all our activities. That all the world may be able to say, "Hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is plentiful redemption. And he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities." God grant it!

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

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.