

King of Glory Lutheran Church

As Far as the East is from the West

Year A: Pentecost 16

Pastor Ruth Ann Loughry

September 12-13, 2026

Matthew 18:21-35 Peter came and said to [Jesus,] “Lord, if my brother or sister sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” ²² Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

²³ “For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴ When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him, ²⁵ and, as he could not pay, the lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions and payment to be made. ²⁶ So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him by the throat he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’ ²⁹ Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ ³⁰ But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. ³¹ When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. ³² Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ ³⁴ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. ³⁵ So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

When Peter asks about the limits of forgiveness, Jesus responds with a parable that suggests human forgiveness should mirror the unlimited mercy of God.

People of God, how vast is God’s forgiveness? How vast? David wrote in Psalm 103:12, “as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us.”

The north pole is located at 90 degrees north latitude and the south pole is located at 90 degrees south latitude. If you travel north from any point on the globe we would eventually reach the north pole.

But if we travelled east from any point on the globe, we would never reach the ‘west’ as long as we were still travelling east. Likewise, the opposite is true. Travel west for as long as possible, eventually reaching the same place you began and you would never reach east.

How vast is God’s forgiveness of us in Jesus Christ? As far as the east is from the west.

I offer this Bible verse to you as an example of extravagance. An example of extremes. The parable we hear today is also a parable of extremes to make a point. Take the money as an example.

A slave in debt 10,000 talents? That amount was likely more than the entire annual income of the king. Or even the whole coinage in circulation of a kingdom like Egypt. 10,000 talents is like sixty million days wages. That slave went on a spending spree. I can't imagine how many credit cards he maxed out.

Then instead of internalizing the grace the King had just granted this slave, he goes out and punishes a fellow slave for only 100 denarii. That's only 100 days wages. A tiny amount compared to the 10,000! Additionally, it was against the law for him to press charges against another slave. And no one could pay a debt from inside a jail cell. The parable is full of hyperbole, and extremes to make a point.

That point is in the last verse. If God's forgiveness of us is so vast, might God's love compel us to learn how to forgive others? As far as the east is from the west.

But, but, but...it's not easy. They don't deserve it. / I don't know how. / He continues hurting me. / She doesn't know the impact of her actions. / I am right! Right?!

Then we remember those common idioms about forgiveness. Forgive and forget. If we forgive then it means we're weak. Forgiveness means going back to get abused some more. Right?!

No way! Not true – any of what I just said. Those are myths about forgiveness and they are not true!

God doesn't ask us to forgive so we might be hurt more or somehow forget the memory of that hurtful day. God doesn't ask us to be weaklings or doormats. God doesn't even ask us to return to a harmful relationship if it will continue to be hurtful.

Let's get those myths about forgiving out of the way. Lewis Smedes, author of The Art of Forgiving; When You Need to Forgive and Don't Know Howⁱ (Ballantine Books. Random House Ballantine Publishing Group. 1996) tackles these myths. He says the following.

Forgiving someone who did us wrong does not mean that we tolerate the wrong he did. Forgiving does not mean that we want to forget what happened. Forgiving does not mean we excuse the person who did it. Forgiving does not mean we take the edge off the evil of what was done to us. It doesn't mean we surrender our right to justice. Forgiving does not mean we invite someone who hurt us once to hurt us again. (Pg. 55-56)

Smedes asserts we are qualified to forgive if we were wounded, if we were wronged and if we have a desire to forgive. (Pg. 46) He claims that the act of forgiving is as natural to us as crying is to a baby or blooming is to a flower bud. Forgiveness is part and parcel of being a human. "We forgive when we discover we really want to forgive, and we want to forgive when we want to heal ourselves from the hangover of a wounded past." (Pg. 69)

What happens when we forgive is that we *first* begin to see the person behind their words or anger or abuse, instead of only seeing their words, anger or abuse. When we can begin to see that person is someone like me, wounded myself, then we're beginning to move towards forgiveness.

My husband is really stressed at work and perhaps that's why he lashed out again tonight. My friend's cancer is back and underneath her bite is fear about the unknown. My brother doesn't know how to navigate feelings very well and he simply doesn't know how much that hurts, *because I haven't told him*.

Secondly, we surrender our right to get even. Wanting revenge keeps us stuck in the past. The pot of anger continues a low boil on the stove. As much as we nurture that old wound, it will continue to move us to revenge. This is different than wanting justice as penalty for wrong doing. (Pg 7) That's something we do in the courts with others help. Surrender, allows us to finally to clean our plate of injured pride and wash it down the sink. So long!

Third, we revise our feelings because we've begun to see our offender as a person. If we feel any good will towards them, that's the movement of forgiveness. (Pg 10 -11) Any tiny seeds like 'I hope she's happy in her new relationship,' is a sign of grace. Even if we can only pray that 'God bless them.'

Along this stretch of desert terrain called forgiveness, trust that as you are working on it, so is God. God is hurting with us, praying for us and praying for your enemy. During some distant sunrise, we'll notice the desert flowers in bloom.

Finally, a word about forgiving ourselves. So often we drag up unforgiveness from our pasts. The should haves, the why didn't I's, the how could I not's, work up shame and guilt. If they move us quickly to our knees before God's throne of grace, wonderful. If they overstay their welcome in our hearts homes, that's when to pay attention.

Most people are harder on ourselves than anyone else. Why is that? Those inner critical voices we carry, like to shout and keep us focused on our faults rather than on God's forgiveness.

The truth is, only Jesus Christ, fully human, was fully perfect. When we demand perfection of ourselves, we are asking of our human souls, what God does not. We are not perfect. God is perfect.

God knows we fall short. God knows our triggers and pride. God knows all those "should's and couldda's". And still...as far as the east is from the west...

As you come for Holy Communion today, pause just a moment longer. Allow the King's grace to be just that. His Holy Grace. Amen.

¹ The Art of Forgiving; When You Need to Forgive and Don't Know How. Ballantine Books. Random House Ballantine Publishing Group. 1996.