**Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost**

**September 13, 2020**

**Text—Matthew 18:21-35**

I’d like all of you to imagine yourself in a hypothetical situation. Suppose you knew someone who owed you money. And suppose it wasn’t a small amount of money. Suppose it came out to exactly $14,212.75. And suppose they had not paid you back in quite some time, even though you had asked them to repeatedly. What would you do? How would you handle this situation? Well, if it were me, and this person wasn’t paying me back, I’d get the authorities involved. I’d sue the person, take them to court, and try to get my money back. And I would guess that most of you here today would do the same thing. $14,212.75 is a lot of money. That’s not chump change that most of us can afford to just let go of. It could mean the difference between living comfortably and getting evicted from our houses. We’re not just going to eat that much money, are we?

But let’s say that at the same time as this person owes you money, you also owe someone else money. And the amount of money you owe is also quite a bit. In fact, it’s quite a bit higher than the $14,212.75 that is owed to you. What you owe is actually $7,134,800,000. Shame on you! I don’t know you could have possibly gotten yourself into this mess. But in this mess you are, and so you owe billions of dollars to this person. Any minute now, he could serve you with a summons to take you to court and fleece you if he wanted to. So you spend your time in absolute terror, wondering if this day will be the day that your life is ruined forever.

Finally, that day comes. Your creditor knocks on your door and asks for his money back. You obviously don’t have $7,134,800,000 just lying around. You spent it all on who knows what. So you do the only thing you can think of to do: you fall down on your knees and plead with your creditor to have mercy on you, to give you more time to pay him back. You’ll never have enough time to make all that money back, but you don’t have anything else to say. So your creditor looks at you, and then smiles and gets a kindly look in his eyes, and he says, “Hey, buddy. Don’t worry about it. I can see how pained you are by this. So I’m just going to cancel your debt. You don’t have to pay me back anything.” And then he walks away, leaving you completely stunned. Your entire life was in this guy’s hands, and he just gave it back to you with no strings attached. How could somebody possibly be so generous?

And how could you yourself not in turn be generous with the person who owes you money, the $14,212.75? Yeah, it’s a lot of money. Yeah, it would hurt you financially to just eat it. But after what your creditor did for you, there’s absolutely no way you can demand to be paid back, much less take anyone to court over it. $14,212.75 is a lot of money, but it’s nothing close to $7,134,800,000. Someone who has been forgiven for so much can’t help but be forgiving themselves, especially to someone who owes them such a comparably small amount.

So you all probably have a few questions at this point, not the least of which is why did I use such oddly specific numbers? Well, those numbers correspond to the numbers that Jesus gives us with his parable in our text. We’ll start with the smaller amount, the one hundred denarii. A denarius was a day’s wage for a laborer, and so the one servant owed the other a hundred days’ worth of wages. To get my $14,212.75 figure, I took the average median income for a family in Springfield for 2018, which is $35,674. Then, I figured out how many workdays there were in 2018, which I got by subtracting weekends and public holidays from 365 days, and ended up with 251 days. Then I divided 100 by 251 to see what percentage of one’s annual workdays 100 days is, which got me to 39.84%. I then multiplied $35,674 by 39.84%, which got me the figure of $14,212.75, actually 74.9 cents to be exact. To get my figure of $7,134,800,000 for the amount the servant owed the king, I took the 10,000 talents number and multiplied that by twenty, since one talent was worth about twenty years’ wages for a day laborer. I then took that number and multiplied it by $35,674, the median income in Springfield, and I got a grand total of $7,134,800,000. So that’s where the numbers came from. Was it really necessary to explain all that math to you? Probably not, but I just wanted you all to know how hard it was.

What the math does show us, though, is just how much money Jesus was talking about in his parable. The unmerciful servant owed the king literally billions of dollars, a sum that he could never hope to repay in a million years. And yet the king forgave his debt. The king took pity on this man, forgave his debt, and let him go. And if the king in Jesus’ parable would forgive so great a debt, how much more will our heavenly Father, who loves us dearly and has claimed us as his own, forgive our debts to him? Unlike in the parable, we don’t owe God money. But we are in debt to him, in debt because of our sins. He demands perfection of us, and he wants us to obey his Law at all times and in all ways. But we clearly have failed to do that. We have not lived up to God’s perfect standards for us. We have not done as we ought. We have sinned in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. We have sinned greatly against him. Every time we have disobeyed God, we have racked up more debt to our name. We are now saddled with debts we could never hope to repay by ourselves. We could never do enough good works to equal, much less surpass, the evils that we have committed. But the good news is that, like the king in the parable, our heavenly Father has canceled our debts. He has washed them away in the waters of our baptisms. Now we stand before God free from debt, free from guilt, and free from the punishment for sin. Our ten thousand talent, billion dollar debt has been canceled. It is no longer on our record. We will not go to the jailers to be tortured, for our Lord God has set us free from debtors’ prison. He has forgiven us for our sins, and we are now free to live our lives without fear of his wrath.

But even though this forgiveness we have received from God is free, it is not cheap. It is not forgiveness that we can receive and then continue to live as we had before. No, it is forgiveness that demands a proper response from its recipient. The unmerciful servant in our parable did not understand this. After having his debt canceled, he immediately went out, found a fellow servant who owed him a hundred denarii, $14,212.75, and demanded that he be paid back. When the fellow servant pleaded for patience, the unmerciful servant refused to give it, and threw his debtor into prison. He did not allow the great forgiveness he had received from the king to change his own hard heart. We cannot be like that servant. We cannot receive free and full forgiveness from God for our many sins against him and then turn around and fail to forgive others who have sinned against us. What they have done to us is nothing compared to what we have done to God. Only a tiny fraction of the sins committed in this world have been committed against us, but every single sin ever committed, including by us, has been committed against God. If God can forgive us for all the times we have disobeyed him, then we can certainly forgive those who have sinned against us, even up to seventy times seven.

I know that forgiveness is hard sometimes. It’s not easy to forgive people who have sinned against you. Your friend who stabbed you in the back. Your boss or teacher who belittled you. Your spouse who hurt you. Your children who humiliated you. Or even that stranger who called you nasty names on that Internet message board. People can really hurt us, and to say that they have sinned against us less than we have sinned against God is not to minimize the impact of that hurt. Remember, the one servant owed the unmerciful servant a hundred denarii, over $14,000. That’s a lot of money! It can be very hard to cancel a debt like that, to let go of your feelings of anger and resentment toward one who has wronged you so badly. But it is the only way for us not only to respond to God’s forgiveness properly, but also to be at peace with ourselves and with others. Forgiving others frees us almost as much as being forgiven by God. It frees us to move on with our lives, to no longer dwell on the hurts we have received in the past. It frees us from being defined by what other people have done *to* us, and allows us instead to be defined by what God has done *for* us. And what he has done for us is give us the free gift of forgiveness, won by the death of his Son Jesus Christ on the cross. By so doing, he has forgiven our sins and empowered us to extend that same gift of forgiveness to others.

Let me share with you a story that illustrates how God’s forgiveness of us empowers us to forgive others and find peace in our lives. Many of you have probably heard of Louis Zamperini, a US Olympic runner who fought in World War II against the Japanese. In 1943, Zamperini’s bomber crashed in the Pacific Ocean on a search and rescue mission due to mechanical failure. Zamperini and two other soldiers were adrift at sea for forty-seven days, after which they were captured by the Japanese and spent the rest of the war in prison camps. While he was in the camps, Zamperini was tormented by his guards, but none more so than one he nicknamed “The Bird.” The Bird would torture Zamperini physically and psychologically, to the point where after the war was over, Zamperini had nightmares about him and drank heavily for years. He decided that he was going to find The Bird and kill him. But before Zamperini was able to do this, his wife convinced him to attend a Christian revival led by Billy Graham. In his sermon, Graham preached about the power of forgiveness, not only the forgiveness that God grants us in Christ, but also the forgiveness that we grant to each other. Graham’s sermon touched Zamperini, and he became a Christian that day. Soon after this, he visited many of his former prison guards in Japan and told them that he forgave them. He wanted to meet with The Bird as well, but The Bird refused. So Zamperini sent him a letter instead, declaring that he forgave his former tormentor for all the terrible things he did. Zamperini’s nightmares ceased, he quit drinking, and his relationship with his family greatly improved. This is what forgiveness does for you: it allows you to move past your anger and resentment and look to the future with joy and hope. Many, many people throughout history have experienced the power of forgiveness, and I would encourage you to make use of this great gift as well if you need to. Holding onto a grudge is no way to live your life, especially not as a Christian.

My dear brothers and sisters, you are forgiven! Your debt to God has been canceled. You will not be punished for your sins, because your Lord Jesus Christ sacrificed himself to satisfy God’s justice. You are free to live your lives in peace, joy, and hope, because you have the promise of eternal life with God. And you are free to forgive others as God has forgiven you. You do not have to hold on to your anger or hurt at those who have sinned against you; you can let go of those feelings and forgive those people. Remember, you have been forgiven for far greater sins against God; the only way to respond properly to that gift is to forgive others who have committed lesser sins against you. Forgiveness begets forgiveness, or at least it should. So as Christians, let us be known as people of forgiveness, people who are forgiven by God and are forgiving of others. If our Lord God can be so loving, merciful, and forgiving, then so too can we. Amen.