

Rev. Kathryn L. Pocalyko
 Lutheran Church of Our Saviour
 North Chesterfield, Virginia
 September 17, 2017

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
 Lectionary texts from Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
 Sermon series observing the 500th Anniversary of the Protestant Reformation
 Topic: Law and Gospel
 Genesis 50:15-21
 Excerpt from Heidelberg Disputation, Thesis 26
 Romans 14:1-12
 Matthew 18:21-35

It's a pretty dopey question for Peter, a seasoned disciple: "How often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" as if forgiveness is all about the scorecard. In response, Jesus tells a parable.

Now, in this parable, there is a line, and that line has been crossed. You could even say there is a law, and that law has been broken. A slave owes money, a lot of it, and he cannot pay. The king could say "Pay!" as many times as he wants, but the slave will never be able to reimburse him.

In other words, the law could say "Do this!" infinitely but it will never be done. The slave will not be pay. And so he faces punishment: he and his wife and children and all his possessions will be sold.

So he falls on his knees and begs for a little more time.

The king is moved to pity and in a shocking turn of events releases him and forgives the debt.

"The law says, 'Do this!' but it will never be done."

"Grace says, 'Believe in this,' and everything is already done."

Without any more of the slave's work or effort, the debt is cancelled. It is forgiven. He is free. All he has to do is believe it.

How to balance judgment and grace, how to balance law and gospel, is the complex question at the heart of this parable. When someone crosses a line, when do you hold them accountable? When do you punish them? When do you let them off the hook?

Punishment and pardon. Judgment and grace. What Lutherans call, "law and gospel." They are tangled issues in the human heart and tangled issues in this story from Matthew.

Because the king's forgiveness is not the end of the story. You heard what happens next: The slave goes out and imprisons someone who owes *him* a piddling sum and the *community*, the fellow slaves, become greatly distressed. He ends up getting punished for how egregiously he acted as a recipient of the king's grace. Yes, there was grace. Yes, he experienced gospel. But even now as one forgiven and set free, He still faces judgment and consequences.

Jesus' parable doesn't ultimately answer the question, "How many times should we forgive?" But it does get at the nature of forgiveness itself. If we think forgiveness is about OURSELVES, or about avoiding punishment, or about anything individualistic or selfish, then our lives will play out like the slave's.

Yes, the Law says, "Do this!" and it is never done. Yes, we need boundary lines and standards for behavior and contracts and rules. And yes, we surely cross those lines and violate those standards and break the rules. Which is why the law cannot save us nor can it ultimately change our hearts.

Grace, on the other hand, says, "Believe in this!" and everything is already done. Which is why the forgiveness of God, given, undeserved, over and over again, believed over and over again, *not* used to our own advantage, *not* used for selfish gains, must truly change hearts and how we live.

*

This week started a brand new year at our congregation's Giving Tree Preschool. And for little kids who have *never* been to school, it is *an adjustment!* Their days are now governed by unfamiliar rules and new standards, new "laws," if you will. Sit in your seat now, line up then, go to the bathroom, raise your hand, wait until snack time to eat. Add to that the students who have learning or behavioral disabilities, and we can see how the first days at preschool becomes a long week of the law saying "Do this!" and it never, never being done.

So when do you punish someone for crossing the line? How often should you forgive?

One student this week was particularly struggling. And the law of preschool got to be too much for him. At one moment his tears and screams became too much for the classroom so his teacher sent him to sit outside in the hallway with Mary, our preschool director. Mary was trying everything to get him calm and compliant: running after him to get him to sit in a chair rather than wander the hall wailing, crouching down to his level to make eye contact and explain the "time-out" to him. Seeing that my intervention wasn't going to help, I popped into another classroom and left them a few moments.

When I came back, everything was quiet, but the new student still wasn't sitting in the chair. Instead, Mary was, and she had the new student cradled, rocking him in her lap: his tears still wet but stopped, face resigned and relaxed, an utter look of comfort and relief having found warm arms and a kind embrace in what must have felt like a prison of rules.

We need the law. No preschool or church or society can run without it. But Oh, do we need the gospel more. Because it was *unanticipated* grace that enabled the boy to sit in the chair when the law failed. It was *unmerited* forgiveness, and *undeserved* kindness that got the student back to class.

Forgiveness, these parables show us, is about restoring our relationship with God and restoring our relationships with one another. Call it grace, call it gospel--it puts us in right and righteous relationship in our life with God and in the communities in which we live.

And everything is already done. AMEN.