

September 17, 2017  
Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost

“Damming Forgiveness”

Matthew 18:21-35

The Mississippi River is not just a huge waterway, it's the lifeblood of the cities along its banks. From the river communities draw transportation, commerce, power and even the very drinking water on which life depends.

Now imagine if in the football game coming up in October the New Orleans Saints utterly creamed my beloved Chicago Bears 147-0, and then all the Bears fans in Iowa, Missouri and Illinois got together and decided to get some payback...by damming the mighty Mississippi River. How stupid would that be?

I mean, they'd build the levee to end all levees, but the river would keep coming. They'd raise the levees higher, and the river would keep coming. St. Louis, Des Moines, and finally Chicago would ultimately be swamped and everyone would drown and die...and ultimately the water would win, topping the levee and flowing down to New Orleans and that nasty Tom Benson, his team and its fans. How stubbornly and stupidly self-destructive would that make those Yankees?

Admittedly, it's not the perfect metaphor, but this is who you are as a Christian if this day you are harboring malice and unforgiveness against anyone in your heart. Jesus Christ's parable is simple and stark; God's forgiveness flows in abundance like a mighty river, but withholding it from coming through you to others would be your downfall.

We can have a real problem forgiving people, because often not forgiving people seems the right, proper and justified.

Consider the two servants in this parable. The one servant did indeed owe the other one 100 denarii—that's like 100 days wages! It's not a small amount of cash, although it is a debt that, in all likelihood, with some effort, could be repaid. However, the first servant is owed this debt and he has every right to demand it be repaid, correct? I mean, if someone borrows money from you and promises to pay it back, you're going to want it back. That's how it works.

Likewise, when someone sins against us, commits an offense against us, we want justice for that. We have a right to be angry, because we've been wronged. We have a right to hold malice against somebody who inflicts an evil against us. This just makes sense. And because it make perfect sense according to the world and seems just and right, even Christians find it real easy to withhold forgiveness and think ourselves righteous in doing so.

But context is key, and that's the point of the parable. The king, the guy with all the power and authority over these servants, or more likely slaves, is kind and gracious in cancelling the immense debt—cancelling it...even though all the servant was asking for was time to repay...even though the debt was too big for him to ever pay off. But showing immense goodness and mercy to someone far beneath him in standing, the king cancels the debt, releases the servant from the impossible burden.

This should have been a life-changing experience. It's pretty clear that the expectation of the king was that the servant would pay things forward, be moved as the recipient of such grace and kindness that he would embrace this attitude and show goodness and mercy to others.

But the servant refuses to be effected. He refuses any mercy whatsoever when it comes to the manageable debt of a fellow servant. He won't grant anything, not time and most certainly

not forgiveness. In this way he rejects the goodness and mercy, and although he doesn't realize it at the time, he is rejecting the grace and kindness he has received from his king also.

Jesus Christ crucified is our impossible debt. On His cross hangs our death, our rejection from God under His wrath, our imprisonment to death, sin, Satan and hell forever. On that cross hangs the Father's mercy, His Son shattered in our place. This unfathomable grace and kindness is given us that our impossible debt would stand forgiven!

And this wonderful forgiveness flows down like a mighty river out of the throne of the risen Christ Himself. The faith He has gifted you receives it daily in your Baptism, weekly in this Holy Supper, constantly in His Word of promise. This does change our life! Or rather, it changes our death into life everlasting!

But you cannot receive this gift yet refuse to allow it to have its effect on you! It doesn't matter how righteous and justified you are in holding back forgiveness. It doesn't matter how horrible the offense is. It doesn't matter how nasty and even evil the person is who offended you. Your debt to God is bigger; insurmountable! You can never pay it back and you didn't and still don't deserve the sacrifice made to forgive you. Yet the Father sent His Holy Son to join your humanity and suffer and die in your flesh to save you—all out of unfathomable love and mercy. If you fail to forgive, you are rejecting love. You are rejecting mercy. In that, ultimately you are rejecting God.

Forgiveness is like the Mississippi River; a great and powerful thing that brings great blessings—peace with God and life forever in His presence. But refusing to allow forgiveness to have its way with you, to infuse you with the love and mercy received from God that you freely pass that grace onto all those around you; it's like damming the river. It is standing in the way of God's work. You're not stopping God's forgiveness from reaching anyone except yourself, and you're drowning in your own wrath.

And ultimately, just like the water over the silly Yankee super-levy, your anger doesn't have the ability to stop God's forgiveness. That person you're so angry with—Jesus shed His holy precious blood for that person. Jesus loves that person. Think about that: that person you won't forgive, Jesus died to forgive. In light of that dynamic, if you're still feeling righteous and justified in not forgiving, you're suffering from a terrible case of stupid.

So in a little while when we're praying the blessed prayer that Jesus Himself gave us and we get to the part where we say "...as we forgive those who trespass against us," mean it. Those words proclaim your forgiveness of everyone who has ever offended you. Mean them. If later you get angry and unforgiving again, say the words again. Forgive again. Ask God's forgiveness for your unforgiveness and forgive again.

God knows we stink at this. That's why He sent perfect forgiveness in Christ. It's yours. It's free. It's complete. It covers what you lack. Just don't be standing in the way of forgiveness flowing in any direction.

The river of God's grace flows mightily over you daily in your baptismal washing, removing your sins and restoring you to your Father in Heaven. Avoid the foolishness of trying to block God's grace from others you think don't deserve it. You don't deserve it. I don't deserve it. They don't deserve it. The Father sends it anyway. The Father sent Him anyway, and His purpose accomplished by the cross is to forgive, both you and that other person. It is a life changing and life giving gift. Believe it. Receive it. And by all means, give it away.

Amen.