

October 6, 2019
Pentecost 15/Proper 22
Text: Luke 17:3-6

³ Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, ⁴ and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him."⁵ The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!"⁶ And the Lord said, "If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you." (ESV)

What Forgiveness Looks Like

In our text, Jesus teaches the necessity of forgiveness. He says, "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him; and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him."¹

For the Christian, extending forgiveness to the offender is not just a choice. It is a duty. We follow the example of our Lord. When Jesus was crucified, the first words out of his mouth were these: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."²

Last Wednesday evening, I saw and heard something astonishing. After former policewoman Amber Guyger had been sentenced to 10 years in prison, the judge permitted the victim's family to address Ms. Guyger. During his time in the witness box, the murder victim's younger brother, 18 year old Brandt Jean, spoke. He said to Amber,

I hope you go to God with all the guilt, all the bad things you've done in the past. Each and every one of us, we've all done things we're not supposed to do. If you truly are sorry, I forgive you. And if you go to God and ask him, he will forgive you. And speaking for myself—not for anyone else in my family—but I love you like anyone else. And I'm not going to say I hope you rot and die. ...but I personally want the best for you.

And I wasn't going to ever say this in front of my family or anyone, but I don't even want you to go to jail. I want the best for you because I know that's exactly what Botham [the victim] would want you to do. And the best would be to give your life to Christ. I'm not going to say anything else. I think giving your life to Christ would be the best thing that Botham would want you to do. Again, I love you as a person. And I don't wish anything bad for you.

< long pause > Then Brandt addressed the judge. He said "I don't know if this is possible but can I give her a hug please? <pause> "Please?" he asked pleadingly. The judge granted it. Then followed a thirty second hug with many tears throughout the courtroom.³

My friends, I have never seen anything like this! This 18 year old Christian from St. Lucia taught us what forgiveness looks like!

This young man put into practice what Jesus commands in our text: **“If your brother sins ... forgive him.”**

But you will say to me, “That’s easier said than done.” And this is very true!

We live in a fallen and broken world. That means that our old, sinful nature prods us to do what we’re not supposed to do.

- We’re not supposed to long for forbidden fruit, or be impatient, or let anger get the best of us, but too often we do.
- We’re supposed to love our fellow church members, our coworkers, and even our enemies, but too often we don’t.⁴
- We’re supposed to forgive, but too often we let the offense fester until it becomes a cauldron of boiling hate.

What should we do? Two things: Repent and forgive!

St. Paul sums up the way things are supposed to be when he says, “And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.”⁵ To what extent are we to forgive? Answer: As much as God has forgiven us. For me, that means I must forgive every day of my life.

The cross is at the center of the Christian faith. If you take away the cross, there is no atonement, no redemption, and no salvation. But with the cross comes spiritual and eternal life. St. Paul writes, “Our Savior Christ Jesus, [has] abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel.”⁶ Indeed, we Christians will never die spiritually or eternally.

And he is the one who says to you and me, **“I am he that lives and was dead; and, behold, I am alive forevermore.”**⁷ He is the one who promises, **“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.”**⁸

The Bible tells us that God justifies sinners and calls them saints. To justify means to declare someone righteous. So in the courtroom of heaven, God lifts high the heavy gavel of divine justice and when, on the downward stroke, it strikes the bench, he pronounces his verdict, saying, “I find you, the believer, not guilty of your sins!” Yes, in Christ, God declares us “not guilty!” We are righteous in his sight!

But sometimes we can get terribly mixed up.

Consider the story of a young woman named Maria. She had just been in a terrible car wreck. Her pastor stopped by to visit her in the hospital. After the initial greetings, she became very anxious.

“Pastor,” she said, “I’ve had a lot of time to think while lying here on this bed, and I’m scared, really scared!” In deep distress, she began to speak of the heavy burden of guilt she felt over her

many sins. And then finally, she cried out, “I nearly died a few days ago and I’m not sure God would have accepted me. As a matter of fact,” she continued, “I’m afraid God will never accept me!”

Her pastor, with all the compassion he could muster, said, “Maria, he never will!” An astonished and terrified look came over her face. Sensing her anguish, the pastor finished his thought. “Maria, he never will accept you so long as you insist on bearing your own sins.” “But,” he quickly added, “God has already accepted Christ’s death on your behalf. And when you trust in him, that Christ has paid for all your sins, God declares you righteous.”

Almost immediately Maria began to smile. Now she really knew the forgiveness in Christ. It was Christ’s righteousness, not her righteousness; his work, not her works; his life, not her life. And now she was overjoyed to know Christ’s forgiveness.

In view of this, we Christians will love even our enemies; we will not give offense to other Christians; and we will freely forgive those who have sinned against us.

Bestowing forgiveness is essential. Listen to the words of Jesus. He says, **“If you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”**

Quite obviously, this is serious business.

Why aren’t we consumed with a passionate desire to put out the flames of anger within us by forgiving the hurt? Actually, we do want to forgive. You see, according to our new nature, our saintly nature, we are passionate about forgiving others. But according to our sinful nature we resist. What a mighty war goes on inside the Christian! But we have another resource: prayer.

Even the apostles thought extending constant forgiveness was a nearly impossible task, so they said to Jesus, “Increase our faith.” But he said to them, **“If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you.” (Luke 17:6).**

What Jesus means is that even a tiny faith in him is not without the resource of prayer. If the apostles prayed for a mulberry tree to be uprooted, then, Jesus—if he should grant their prayer—will make it take place. So also, if we pray for power to forgive a person who has hurt us, God will give us the strength to do so. After all, it is God’s will that we extend forgiveness.

Let’s revisit the Amber Guyger trial. Let’s hear Brandt Jean’s witness impact statement once again. To his brother’s killer, he said,

“I forgive you. And if you go to God and ask him, he will forgive you. And speaking for myself—not for anyone else in my family—but I love you like anyone else.”

Beloved, we should forgive others as quickly as we want Jesus to forgive us.

Think of Jesus. He has built a chapel of love in his heart. That chapel took the form of a cross. He still bears the marks of that love in his hands, feet, and side. Trusting in him, you and I have his forgiveness. And with that forgiveness, he gives us the power to forgive.

May we fervently love others. And may we forgive them as Christ has forgiven us. In the name of Jesus: Ἄμεν.

Soli Deo Gloria!

Endnotes

¹See Luke 17:3-4 ESV.

²See Luke 23:34.

³See link at <https://www.wfaa.com/article/news/special-reports/botham-jean/botham-jeans-brother-amber-guyger-embrace-following-witness-impact-statement/287-c70ff4b7-aafd-448a-b24a-f67b173af40d>.

⁴See Matthew 5:43-44 where Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you ...”

⁵See Ephesians 4:32.

⁶See 2 Timothy 1:10, ESV.

⁷See Revelation 1:18.

⁸See John 5:24, ESV.