

## Matthew 18:21-35

### 16<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

*Peter came and said to Jesus, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. 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.' Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. 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. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."*

Forgiveness lies at the heart of the Christian idea, but it so often misunderstood. It is misunderstood because, for some reason, it has become linked to the word "forget." To "forgive and forget" appear so often together that it is no wonder that to many, many, people they have come to mean almost the same thing. So often we when we hear about forgiveness, when we are asked to forgive someone, what is understood is that we are meant to act as if something either never happened or to accept that whatever happened was actually ok.

And to make it worse, the sacrificial character of Christian life has been twisted to shame and guilt people into accepting this idea that forgiveness is tantamount to accepting that the things that hurt us are of no consequence, that our injuries and our suffering are either acceptable or worse, never actually happened; that the pain we experience is inconsequential.

It is clear though, from the example of Jesus's own life that when He talks about forgiveness this isn't what he means. Not at all. Forgiveness isn't about sweeping things under the rug and encouraging or empowering those who abuse our goodness; it is actually about empowering us who have suffered from others' actions.

Christian forgiveness is about refusing to allow other people's abuse to define who we are. It is about rejecting our identity as victims and restoring our own agency, our own ability to define who we are and to make our own choices.

Christian forgiveness is saying that the things you did to me won't shape my choices in the future. It is saying that Christ's love and salvation will take away my fears and that I won't be bullied or pressured into either doing what I know is wrong or refusing to do what I know is right.

The life of Jesus is meant to show us that we can be bold agents of love in a world filled with hurt, disappointment, and despair. The cross shows us that the evil and darkness of the world knows no limits, but the empty tomb shows us that evil cannot overcome the love of God. Even as Jesus was dying on the cross, he forgave those who tortured and executed him, proclaiming that what they did would not deter him from being his true self or from his willingness to live fully into the love of God. It is love that underpins the whole of creation, and we when we live our lives within its embrace, we can turn away those who would hurt us, taking away their power to define us, and be fully the people we were created to be, the beloved children of God.