



## Sermon for the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 2020

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

**Exodus 14:19-31**

**Romans 14:1-12**

**Matthew 18:21-35**

Greetings, from St. Luke's in Coeur d'Alene – where today the air is thick with smoke from the fires ravaging our western states. We pray for all firefighters in this time, for their safety, speed and wisdom, and strength. And we pray for all who have been displaced and who have lost their homes. And we pray for rain and restoration of these lands.

Do you ever have that question that comes up as you face a new day...“What’s my motivation?” You know, like the old line in some TV shows or movies where actors are sort of poking fun at the craft of acting by inviting us into the same question – “I just don’t understand, as I’m going into this scene, why am I saying this line? What’s my motivation?”

Actors do actually puzzle over this question. They try to take on the mental, emotional, physical, and social life of the characters they are trying to embody and convey to us. They try to understand what the characters are thinking and feeling, what they are seeking, what they believe most and pursue most – and then try to bring that through to the surface for us to see.

These days, in the slowing and the muddled life of this pandemic, when days can seem to blend together, this can become a strange kind of question for each day that we rise to face the uncertainties of the world around us. “What’s my motivation?” What do I hope for today? What do I want to achieve or pursue today? What am I stirred by today?

This is a big question. How are you moved? And, in today’s scriptures, we focus in on this question that becomes a key question for life. How am I moved? By resentment, or by compassion? What’s my motivation? To control, or to free? To get back what I think I deserve, or to let go?

Peter’s opening question follows Jesus’ words immediately before this, which we heard last week. Remember, last week we heard Jesus’ method of conflict resolution – if you have been offended by another, don’t ignore or shun the person, don’t sweep the situation under the rug, but go and confront and converse with the person; and then, if that doesn’t work, come again, this time with others to serve as witnesses; and then, if that doesn’t work, come together again with the whole church community as witnesses; and then, if that doesn’t work, only then can you put some distance up, and let that person be to you like a tax collector or foreigner – but even that means that you still stay open to relationship with that person, just like Jesus welcomed tax collectors and sinners, and regarded everyone as his neighbor.

This might have sounded daunting, even exhausting, to Jesus' disciples. So, Peter asks the question on everyone's mind – Jesus, just how far does this forgiveness thing really go? "How many times?" asks Peter. And Peter tries to anticipate Jesus' generosity by stretching beyond the commonly held teaching in that period of Judaism (calling for people to forgive up to three times), so he suggests seven. Jesus immediately responds with a far higher number – "not seven times, but seventy-seven times."

That is a lot of times to forgive someone! I would lose track of the score!

Now, let's admit it, we all have "kept score" in our lives, in our relationships. And, we have hopefully learned that keeping score is not a healthy way to be in relationship with others. We try to teach our kids – my Lord, I'm still trying to get across to our teens – to not "keep score" of who gets what goody or who had to do which chores or who got to choose the last movie-night movie. It gets wearisome. And it does not build anything but a spirit of entitlement. We try to remember in our marriages and families, and in our work relationships, not to bring up the stored arsenal of past offenses by going down the path of "this is just like what you always do – like last week, and last year, and ten years ago." This is only a recitation of resentments that have not truly been released.

These are ways we seize one another by the throat and say, "Pay me what you owe me!"

You know, I could not help but wonder, what was the king's slave's motivation in going after his fellow slave the way he did? Why would someone who has just been forgiven so much turn with such cruel demand on one of his own colleagues?

I wonder if the slave ever really allowed himself to take in the gift of the king's forgiveness? I wonder if instead he was still hung up on the embarrassment and shame of being found out, of being brought before the king and his court and having his unthinkably massive debts exposed publicly, and of begging for mercy? I wonder if his head and heart were so full of those things that he lashed out at one of his colleagues who owed him a few months wages?

Forgiveness can be offered. And forgiveness must also be accepted.

What if the slave had really allowed himself to feel – and to fully take in – the merciful, compassionate forgiveness offered to him by the king?

Imagine – being forgiven a debt that was discovered to be at the equivalent today of several billion – BILLION! – dollars! How would you feel, being forgiven such a debt that you could never pay?

Imagine, what the king was giving up as he forgave the slave. But, in the end, how could the slave ever even hope to repay a fraction of what was owed? And how could the king ever hope to recuperate even a small fraction of what was lost? So, what was the king's motivation?

Simply, mercy.

But, with an expectation that mercy continue to be showed and given.

It is sad that the slave was caught in the unpayable tangle of his own resentments, his own shame, and his own anger at himself and the world. It's not just sad, it's tragic.

We pray each day, each week, in the words Jesus taught us, "Forgive us our sins, (just) as we forgive those who sin against us." In Matthew, the words of the Lord's prayer are literally, "Forgive us our debts, just as we forgive our debtors."

Resentment is poison, friends. And it can poison our ability to offer forgiveness – because it also poisons our ability to receive forgiveness. It is only poison for ourselves, even as we hold on to it hoping it will hurt someone else that we think deserves it.

What was Pharaoh's motivation, as he pursued the Israelites once again? He simply could not let go, even when he had lost so much – because his heart was hardened, and there was not space for mercy in his hardened heart, for others or for himself. That old message, "I must win!!" had taken hold of him so much that he could no longer truly rule and lead with the care a ruler must have for his or her people of all types.

Even in such situations, we believe and hope and pray that God will make a way, just as God did for the people of Israel.

But we also believe and hope and pray that we – and the rulers of this world – will choose a motivation that is God's gift to all of us to share, the gift of compassion-filled forgiveness.

Remember, as it says in our passage from Romans today, we are not the judges, but God alone is judge. And this judge is the same God who loves us enough to give himself for us, who is also our advocate pleading our case, crying out for us, as Jesus cries out from the cross to the Father, "Father, forgive them. They do not know what they are doing."

I want to invite you this week, as you pray your confession and ask for forgiveness, to hear – to really hear and take in and let soak deep into your bones – the promise of forgiveness that God gives you, again and again and again. Know it. Embrace it. Feel it. Take it in as the gift that is so freely given.

Oh, God, open our hearts and shift our motivations. Let us awaken to the desire to have compassion and to offer forgiveness – and to give up our own resentments. And let us truly know and accept the forgiveness you offer us. For it will transform our lives, and the whole world.

Amen.