

**“Tables of Grace”**  
**15<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost– Sept 13, 2020 – Mt 18:21-35/A**

Peter, Peter, Peter. You have taught us so much over the years. Remember the time you went to Jesus and asked how often we should forgive? And then hedged your bets by hoping to impress Jesus with the suggestion of 7 times? We all know 7 is a number of completion - indicating wholeness - so 7 seems to be a really good rule of thumb. But Jesus says, No, not 7 times, but 77 times! And in that moment, we all learned that forgiveness isn't about the numbers. Forgiveness is ongoing - a way of life. A way of life that can change the world. And our world today, is in dire need of changing.

The Rev Dr. Ray Pickett, a friend and Rector of my seminary, recently posed a challenging question. He asks, *“What does the world need from the church?”* I believe the parable that follows the conversation between Peter and Jesus teaches us one way to answer that question.

A king wants to settle up with his slaves. One of them owes him so much money there is no reconciling the debt. So, he throws himself on the king's mercy, and grace abounds. The debt is forgiven. It really doesn't cost him much at all.

But afterwards, the slave runs into a buddy who owes him a pittance, and instead of passing on the mercy he had just been shown, he throws his buddy into prison. For him, even forgetting about a few bucks was too hard for him to let go. He had skin in the game, he had face to save, he needed the money.

Whatever motivated him, those who heard the story might have learned a few things. Gratitude cannot be bought. And each of us gets to choose based on what is good for us or what is good for others.

Imagine these characters around a table. The king is furious at the slave. The slave's buddy will never speak to him again. The other slaves sit in various stages of resentment or self-righteousness because they are convinced that they would not have done what he did. And now they have to live together in the same neighborhood, and they have to eat from the same table. It could have been completely different, if one slave had chosen differently, if forgiveness really was a way of life.

You know, Jesus sat around a table like that. On the night before he died, he called the 12 together and sat among them: the betrayer, the denier, the tax collector, the zealot, the ones who followed and the ones who still didn't know whether they really believed or not – they were all there at the table. And Jesus invited them into a different kind of life. *I give you a new commandment, that you love one another just as I have love you. Just as I have loved you, so you should love one another.*

That night, their lives changed forever, and then they changed the world around them. Because that night, at that table, they were learning a new way: As Bishop Michael Curry preaches: *It's not just about me, it's about we. This is the way of love. You are to love and be loved, to give and to receive, to do justice and to be justly done unto. It's not just about me, it's about we. God made us to give and receive, to bless and be blessed, to love and to be loved, to do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with God.*

Martin Luther King said. "We are bound together in an inescapable network of mutuality. Tied in a single garment of destiny." It's not about me, but we! *And brothers, sisters, siblings, that is how the church changes the world.*

So how does one start living a life of forgiveness? Perhaps by truly embracing our own state of having been forgiven ourselves. Not because we deserve it or have earned it, but because *God so loved the world...* But what if I can't get there – or don't want to live that way?

I have been working with a group of folks who follow my Morning Reflections through a book called ***Behold Your Life***, by Macrina Wiederkehr. Since the beginning of August, we have been on a pilgrimage of sorts, to go back and visit our memories and impressions of our journey of life – both the blessings and the bites – as she calls them. To do the healing work we all need to truly behold our life as God does, we were asked to “companion” our shadow side. This meant that we would visit with the bad stuff that had happened to us or that we allow. We were to sit with, experience, listen to and learn from our dark side. We were to befriend OUR: Anger. Resentment. Suffering. Rejection. Guilt. Fear. Sin. Immaturity. Jealousy. Addiction. Envy. Loneliness. Each of these were to be heard and understood, in an effort to heal.

Each time we learned more about ourselves, and I began to envision what I call our “Table of Shadows.” We were to invite them all to our table, as one invites a collection of friends – to listen to them, learn about them, understand them, and finally, forgive them. It was hard work for some, some days, but we did heal. Or we each began to.

Finally, as we come to the conclusion, we are to envision our Table populated not only with the bites, but the blessings: Deep gratitude, Immense love. Healing grace. Fierce yearning. Childlike trust. Abundant joy. Lasting beauty. Quiet peace. And we learned to bring all that we are to God. *“This is my life. This is who I am. This is what I bring to you. I am broken, wounded and scarred. Yet with all of these burdens, I am still able to be your song to the world,”* because I am forgiven.

Can you imagine what your Table of Forgiveness might look like? Who needs to be there, seeking your forgiveness? Who will be there when you arrive, because they have forgiven you? How will these various relationships look at each other? Will they discover that they are not really divided, but have always been one? The blessings embrace the bruises. The bites are healed in that embrace.

Will the Table of Shadows become your Table of Grace? We are stronger than we think as we leave that table. We are strengthened by Christ's body and blood. We are bitten and blessed to bring to the world what it needs. Justice. Forgiveness. Mercy. Reconciliation. Grace. It is not about ***me***, it is about ***we***. And that, my friends, is God's Work. Our Hands. It is also how we change the world. Amen.

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**Resources:** Rev. Dr. Ray Pickett, Rector, Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary; Right Rev. Michael Curry, Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, for Day1 online; Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Letters from a Birmingham Jail*; Macrina Wiederkehr, *Behold Your Life*.