



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Scott E. Schul

15th Sunday after Pentecost: September 13, 2020

Sermon Title: "Forgiven"

Gospel Text: Matthew 18:21-35

On D-Day, June 6th, 1944, a 19-year-old American GI named David Silva landed on Omaha Beach with the 29th Division. On the other side of the lines, up on a bluff, a 21-year-old German soldier named Heinrich Severloh was positioned with his division. As soon as Silva, the American, reached the sand, he was hit three times in the chest by machine gun fire. The Americans eventually overtook the German position and Severloh, the German, became a prisoner of war.

Severloh and Silva both survived the war, and in the 1960s met in Germany. As they shared war stories, Severloh realized that he was the one who fired the shots that nearly killed Silva on the beach on that famous day. Several decades after that first meeting, the two men met again, on the very Normandy beach where each had fought, and there they embraced. The American, Silva, said, "I forgave him, even though he didn't want me to. I think he really wanted this, he was hurting a lot."¹

The theme of forgiveness runs throughout all of our readings today, and function as an extension of the notion of reconciliation that Pastor Hetrick so beautifully shared with us last Sunday. It's self-evident that forgiveness must be at the foundation of any effort at reconciliation. And so our lessons today contain God's call to us to be a forgiving people. That shouldn't be a surprise to us. Intuitively, I think we all know that for a church community to be healthy, it must be a community that encourages and practices forgiveness. For that matter, forgiveness is necessary for *any* community and *any* relationship to survive and thrive.

And so I'm not going to preach about how important it is for us to be forgiving people, because you already know that. Instead, I want to use the Gospel parable to unpack one big reason why we sometimes *struggle* to forgive. Let's start with an observation: If you believe you are *unlovable*, it will be difficult for you to *love someone else*. If you believe you are *worthless*, it will be difficult for you to *value another*. And if you believe you are *unforgivable*, it is unlikely you will be able to *forgive anyone else*.

The German soldier in my opening story resisted the forgiveness of the man he had shot in battle. Decades after the fact, he was still ashamed of what he had done and the evil cause he had fought to defend. He felt unforgiveable. And that sense of utter unworthiness must have impacted his ability to forgive others.

What about you? Do you think God can forgive you? Do you think God should forgive you? Do you think God even wants to forgive you? If you answered "no" to any of those

questions, then I suspect you struggle to forgive others. And so if you hear nothing else today, hear this: God loves you and truly desires to forgive you.

If you have any doubt about what I just said, consider the parable. What makes it interesting is the *magnitude* of forgiveness that's at stake. That sort of gets lost with all the ancient currency measures. Here's how it breaks down: the slave who was forgiven by the king was forgiven a truly astonishing amount – an amount that would take the average person over *164,000 years* to earn. After that slave was freed, he got in trouble because he refused to forgive his debtor an amount equal to about *three months' wages*. That's a meaningful amount of money, but *nothing* compared to 164,000 years of earnings. So why did the slave who had been forgiven such a huge sum by his king fail to forgive his own debtor? I believe it's because the slave did not trust in the king's forgiveness. We can understand that, can't we? It sounded too good to be true. Who forgives a debt equal to 164,000 years of salary? And so if you don't trust that God forgives you, chances are you won't forgive your neighbor. And that has devastating consequences both for you and your neighbor.

Friends, God's mercy, love, and ability to forgive transcend anything we can comprehend. There's nothing you have done or failed to do that God isn't willing to forgive! And so whatever is holding you back, take it to our Lord in prayer and see for yourself, because the issue isn't God's willingness to forgive us. As Martin Luther observed, God forgives us even before we think to *ask* for that forgiveness.² And as our Lutheran Confessional documents proclaim, "God freely forgives us on account of Christ and on account of his promise, and not on account of our works."³ But we ascribe *human* reluctance to forgive to our *God of love*, and thereby convince ourselves of the impossibility of God's forgiveness. The result? Our conscience becomes tortured, uneasy, and restless. The cure? We constantly need to be reminded of God's joy in forgiving us. We persistently need the peace, assurance, and liberation of hearing once more that we are loved, forgiven, and reconciled to God.

Sometimes those reminders come to us through the Gospel, which Luther said is "nothing but forgiveness."⁴ Sometimes we hear that forgiveness directly from God. But mostly we hear it in the voice of our neighbor. By way of example, I'll share a personal story.

Mary was a member of a congregation I once served. She was a real jokester with an unforgettable laugh. Mary's health was declining and it was hard for her to get to church, so I stopped by her house to bring communion to her. We sat at her kitchen table. But before we could begin, she turned to me with a look of anguish on her face. She grabbed my hand, held it like a vice, and revealed that she had doubts about whether Jesus had forgiven her for something she had done as a teenager. I didn't pry for details because I had absolute confidence that whatever was troubling Mary's conscience, Jesus had forgiven her long, long ago.

But Mary doubted that God *could* or *would* or even *should* forgive her. It was a burden she had been carrying for decades and decades, a burden that weighed heavily on her and impacted her relationship not only with God but with others. After so many years of carrying this weight, I don't know what prompted her to finally share it with someone, but thanks be to God she did that day, right there in her kitchen.

I assured Mary that Jesus does indeed love and forgive her. But Mary needed to experience this in a more personal way. And so we proceeded with the Rite of Confession and Forgiveness that we use for home communions. With Mary's hand still gripping mine, I ended with these words from that rite: "Mary, Almighty God, in his mercy, has given his son to die for you and, for his sake, forgives you all your sins. As a called and ordained minister of the Church of Christ, and by his authority, I therefore declare to you the entire forgiveness of all your sins, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen." As I concluded these words, I could see the weight visibly lift from Mary's shoulders. With tears of gratitude in her eyes and joy in her heart she gave thanks to Christ for new beginnings, new life, new hope, and new peace.

I want *you* to feel that same weight lift from your shoulders. I want *you* to believe and trust that God forgives abundantly. God can even forgive 164,000 years' worth of sin, because God loves you with a breadth and depth beyond our understanding. The German soldier at Normandy and even my dear now-departed friend Mary struggled to accept this. Don't let that happen to you. God wants *you* to experience a new beginning, new life, new hope, and new peace. Be freed from the burden of *your* sins and worries so you can free *others*. *You are loved. You are forgiven. Amen.*

Citations:

¹ Adapted from www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=180799106970749&id=112532557130738

² Luther's *Large Catechism* p. 452, section 88 (Kolb/Wengert edition)

³ Apology to the Augsburg Confession, p. 203, section 95 (Kolb/Wengert edition)

⁴ Luther's *Large Catechism* p. 452, section 88 (Kolb/Wengert edition)