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Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT

September 13, 2020

15th Sunday after Pentecost, Year A

Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

About 20 years ago Catherine Ryan Hyde wrote a book titled “Pay it Forward.” You might remember the movie based on the book. The storyline is about a young boy who is given a school assignment to come up with an idea that will change the world. His idea is to do something helpful, even generous, for three people and then ask them to “pay it forward” rather than paying back the one who has done the good deed for them.

From the book and the movie that idea took off and we began to hear stories of people who would pay the toll on a toll bridge for the car behind them or pay for a meal for someone else in a restaurant. I have been the recipient of those kinds of gifts and it’s a wonderful surprise!

But in the book, the good deeds that are paid forward are really extravagant. I can’t remember all of them, but I do remember one man who had received a generous gesture and then paid it forward by giving his car to a stranger who needed transportation. And this wasn’t just your average economy sedan, it was some kind of luxury car.

Even though the giver was wealthy enough to have bought the car in the first place, it was still a big deal that he would hand the keys over to someone he really didn’t know, only that they needed it more than he did. The man gave generously in response to a generous act that had been given to him.

This is the point that Jesus is trying to make with Peter and the church that he is forming. We have some similar instruction from Paul to the church in Rome from our first reading today. Jesus and Paul are teaching the church what it means to live as God’s holy people, within their communities of faith, so that they can carry this kind of love and justice into the world.

Both of these lessons today are continuations from the ones we heard last week, so it’s important to put them back together and get the larger picture.

Last week, the passage from Romans began, “Owe no one anything, except to love one another.” Paul uses the image of owing, or being indebted to another, just as Jesus does in his parable today. Paul narrows down the core of our relationship in the Christian community to love—not the warm and fuzzy feeling of love, but the commitment to care for the well-being of one another, even, he says today, when we don’t necessarily agree.

The setting for this group of new Christians in Rome is that there are some who come from a Jewish background and some who do not, also known as Gentiles. They have all heard the good news of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection and have come to believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.

But the Jewish Christians want the Gentiles to follow their customs, particularly around food and festivals. The Gentiles don’t agree. They have other customs that they think are just fine and don’t, in their opinions, contradict the Christian life and faith.

Paul tells these two camps, “We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord.” In other words, we have many choices to make, and as believers in Christ, we are called to make those choices in response to the gift of life and grace we have received from Christ.

Over the centuries the Christian Church has grown into many different denominations. I am as guilty as anyone about expressing my opinions—which, honestly, are judgments—about some of the other denominations, even those who share our Lutheran name.

Setting aside our judgments of others is an act of love, and it can be a generous one. Paul’s concern is for those who are “weak”, or perhaps new, in faith. This might be children, or those who are on the edges of Christian community, who are watching how we love one another, even when we experience differences of opinion or practices.

Jesus calls us into another aspect of generous love that we are expected to pay forward—forgiving one another. Last Sunday, Jesus gave us step by step instruction to help those in the church work toward reconciliation when difficulties rise up. Jesus promises to be present when we gather in his name to build up our communities of faith.

In response to this teaching, Peter offers up what he probably thinks is rather generous. “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” In Jewish law the directive is to forgive up to three times, so seven seems over the top. And, since seven represents the idea of completion, wholeness, and even healing, it was a logical and generous number!

But Jesus blows Peter’s generosity out of the water, “Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times.” In other words, don’t count. Don’t judge how much love is enough. Keep loving, keep forgiving, keep working toward reconciliation.

In his parable, the debt that is forgiven by the king to the first servant was extreme. One talent was worth about 15 YEARS of a laborer’s wage, so 10,000 talents was an impossible debt for the servant to repay. But when that debt was forgiven, we would have expected the servant to pay that generosity forward, and this is, of course, the point that Jesus is trying to make in this parable.

Week after week, we gather here to draw from a deep well of forgiveness given by God’s endless and abiding love for us. Then, refreshed and renewed by God’s generous grace, we are sent out to pay it forward to those we meet. Outside of Christian community, this is a tall order.

We encounter different opinions and practices in all areas of life. We are called to vote, spend our money, and respond to the needs and crises around us based on our love and gratitude to God, knowing that we won’t always agree with our neighbors about those choices.

So, within our Christian community, where we have been gathered by the Spirit, fed by Christ, and showered with the love of grace of God, we grow together in attitudes and actions of generosity and grace.

Forgiveness is rarely a one and done interaction. Forgiveness is a way of being in community, especially as communities who name and claim forgiveness from God. Then we pay it forward in our life together, listening to different perspectives to learn from one another rather than to judge. We pay it forward by keeping doors open to reconciliation and healing. We pay it forward by caring more for each person than about being right.

Now, there are times when ongoing relationship is not possible. Forgiveness does not mean there are not consequences when the offense has crossed the lines of abuse or violence or when one party is not willing to work toward reconciliation.

Forgiveness is about letting go, releasing the other from paying us back so that we can both move forward. As people of God, we take this generous gift of forgiveness from God and look for ways to pay it forward as an expression of our gratitude.

We have printed the words of Psalm 103, our psalm for the day, that declares the goodness of God. As we enjoy the musical offering next, I invite us to meditate on these words, as we prepare our hearts for confession.

Thanks be to God! Amen

Prayers of Intercession

Drawn together in the compassion of God, we pray for the church, the world, and all those in need.

God of open arms, you welcome us when we are weak in faith. Uphold your church throughout the world; make it a place of welcome. Strengthen faith through Bible studies and children's programs, confirmation classes and youth ministries. Nurture new ministries of education and growth.

Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

God of lands and seas, the heights of the heavens show us the vastness of your steadfast love. Have compassion on your creation, especially where fires rage and the smoke is dangerous. We pray for rain in the west and for flood waters to recede in the east. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

God of justice, lead the nations away from the ways of violence. Guide the United Nations and other organizations that seek reconciliation across national borders. Show families, neighborhoods, and nations how to welcome diversity while sharing common ground. Preserve our election season from abuse and rancor. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

God of tender power, we live to you. Once more we beg for a way through the pandemic. Comfort the afflicted. Support medical workers. Prepare a vaccine. Bring healing to bodies, minds, and relationships, especially for those named in our bulletin today, and those we name in our hearts. *wait*

Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

Whether we live or whether we die, we are yours. We thank you for those who have shown us faithfulness, for the knees that taught us how to bow to you and the tongues that taught us to praise you. Inspire us to carry on their example as we encourage one another in faith and love. Lord, in your mercy,

hear our prayer.

All these things and whatever else you see that we need, we entrust to your mercy; through Christ our Lord.

Amen.