

The Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost – 2022

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4

2 Timothy 1:1-14

Luke 17:1-10

Jesus is a great teacher, right? Hyperbole, exaggeration – it is a tactic that He uses from time to time in order to make a point. When teaching about how we are not to be hyper-critical of our neighbor, that we are not to be all Judgy-McJudgerstein, Jesus illustrates the idea of your brother having a speck in his eye, which you happen to be all uptight about, while having a log in your own eye that you are apparently either oblivious to or cool with. Jesus brilliantly illustrates our hypocritical nature when it comes to how we view our own sin versus our brother's sin. Hyperbole, exaggeration; it's a great technique to drive home a point. "First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye" (Matthew 7:5).

So is Jesus being hyperbolic when He said this: "Temptations to sin are bound to come, but woe to the one through whom they come! It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin" (Luke 17:1-2)? Is Jesus trying to get a laugh out of His audience? "Oh, man, that Jesus! He's always playing around. A millstone? That's way too harsh. Ha, ha! Good one, Jesus." Just to be clear, a millstone is a big, honking beast of a stone. It can weight 3000 pounds and be seven feet in diameter. Even a small millstone tied around your neck would take you to the bottom of the Mariana Trench in a matter of seconds. Just so we're absolutely clear, and I know that I've said that already, if you're going around causing people to sin it would be way better for you to suffer a radically unpleasant death than for what is in store for you when God judges humanity. Do you think that He's serious?

Remember, this is the Son of God who took up our human flesh to save, to protect His "little ones," a monumental act of humility and love. He was prepared to bleed and die, to bear all sin in His holy person and to endure His Father's punishment against sin, all of it, just to protect, to save His little ones. He oversees His little ones' faith, giving it through His Word, His Spirit. He ministers with great tenderness those He died for, with a fervent desire to give them the fulness of His holiness, to shepherd them through this world to His heaven, to bless and sustain them on that pilgrimage. Do you think that He takes it lightly when some nefarious dweeb messes with His little ones? Do you think that He just chalks such a thing up to the world being broken and that sinners are everywhere and that no one should ever be held to account for them preying on the vulnerability of others because God loves everyone?

Oh, He's serious. He's firm and He's unmistakably clear and He's supremely serious. If anyone steers people away from Him, that is going to be trouble with a capital T. Sin is out there and there's no possibility that you are going to stop it from *being* out there or "in you." But if you're teaching others to sin by your behavior, then that's an entirely different manner. And the one thing that you're to be mindful of is teaching people not to forgive, teaching people that's its okay with you when they don't forgive because you don't do it so much either. The Lord tells His disciples this directly. "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you

must forgive him” (Luke 17:3-4). What’s the alternative? No dude, I’m not forgiving you. I’m tired of your low-down despicable self and you can just jump in the lake.

How many of y’all believe that it is your duty to forgive those who sin against you? Conversely, how many of y’all believe that you are doing the most remarkable thing ever, for which God ought to stop and take notice with tears in His eyes and a quivering lip and applaud appreciatively that you are condescending to actually forgive someone who has sinned against you more than once? Whom do you serve? Who is your God? Does He *ever* ask you to go someplace that He has not already ventured? How close do you want to be to Him? How intimately do you want to know Him? To be sure, in holy baptism you were grafted into Him. He is the vine and you are the branch. By His Word you come to understand His ways, His grace, His devotion to you. In this Divine Service there is a communion, you with the Lord Christ, unlike any other, whereby you interact with Him in the most superlative way. But there is more. In forgiving others, who do you think you learn of? Who reveals Himself to you as you forgive? Who blesses your heart as you forgive? Who gives an epiphany of Himself to the world, through you, when you forgive?

It is our duty. It is nothing but the most commonplace and ordinary thing for a Christian to forgive others, regularly, repeatedly, graciously. To make that point, Jesus said this: “Will any one of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep say to him when he has come in from the field, ‘Come at once and recline at table’? Will he not rather say to him, ‘Prepare supper for me, and dress properly, and serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink’? Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty’” (Luke 17:7-10). How awesome is that, where our “duty” is to forgive people? What a blessed duty that is! Being as Christ is, to reflect that goodness, that love for others? Amazing. If you start thinking that you’re “all that” one of the first things to go is forgiving others. Pride is unforgiving. Pride is yucky on the inside. Pride is a liar and a cheat and a mirage. “Get thee behind me, pride, for you do not have in mind the things of God but the things of men.”

Listen to these words from St. Paul and completely seize them, internalize them, for they are extraordinarily real: “If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, in any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Philippians 2:1-4, NIV). You *are* united to Christ. You have received remarkable encouragement from Him. He has set you free from your sin and united Himself to you. He knows you and loves you. You are His little one. His cross tells you your value. God poured out His life because He sees you as infinitely valuable. He is more ready to forgive you than you are ready to ask. He is always there when you turn to Him and He will always be there, calling you back to Himself, if you should ever stray. His holiness swamps your profane self-indulgence. He restores you to the Father and heaven is your home. It is a sweet duty to do as He does. He knows that others will hurt you and He still calls you to forgive. He is in you to will and act as He wills and acts. You are a Christian. There is no one in this world who is more

Christian than you. You bear the Savior's name. You bear the Savior's life. You bear the Savior's love.

We are His witnesses. Forgiveness is a blessed witness. There is no witness quite like a Christian forgiving someone who has sinned against him. Do it quietly, humbly, graciously. God will use it as He sees fit, but be assured, He *will* use it. That's why His church is here on earth – to bear witness to His forgiveness, to receive what He wills to give and to cherish our union with Him. To Him be glory forever and ever. Amen.