

ST. JOHN'S AT DIOCESAN CENTER IGLESIA EPISCOPAL DE SAN JUAN

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“Forgiving”

JESUS MATH

The Rev. Andrew F. Kline

Text of a Sermon preached on the 15th Sunday after Pentecost

September 13, 2020

GENESIS 50:15-21 | PSALM 103

ROMANS 14:1-12 | MATTHEW 18:21-35

In the winter of 2007, Cameron White’s Jeep hit Chris Williams sedan, jackknifing it up against an underpass on a Utah highway. The moment Chris White was able to focus beyond blood and glass, to look around him, he saw in an instant that his pregnant wife, next to him in the passenger seat, and his daughter, in the seat behind, were dead. He would have to wait, until after his rescue, to find out that his son behind him would survive. Cameron White, meanwhile, was so drunk that he did not even know he had hit another car, but knew he was in so much pain and trouble that he tried to slit his wrists and bleed out before police and rescue crews could showed up to “save him.”

At the moment Chris Williams realized he had lost half his family, he heard a voice say, “you will be alright. Pray for whoever hit you.” Wrapped in that word pray was the meaning of, focus your concern, have compassion, worry about what that person is going to be going through when they realize what they have done. True to this revelation, the very next day, after Chris had learned that a 17 year old drunk driver was responsible, issued a public statement letting Cameron know that he had already forgiven him for what he had done. And in that statement he put it simply, equitably. Each of them had already received the punishment of a life sentence. He did not want to add to either verdict - the wrenching sudden loss of loved ones, and the intolerable burden of an unplayable debt, with hatred and vengeance.

Because he was 17 at the time of the accident and Chris had asked for leniency, Cameron would be sentenced to three years in Juvenile detention. They saw each other during the trial, but as Cameron tells it, he only could look in Chris’ eyes once, and only to mouth the words, “I’m sorry.” After almost a year, at Cameron’s request, the two would meet. At that meeting Cameron would be able to ask Chris why and how he had forgiven him so completely and so quickly. It turns out that, aside from the still small voice, years earlier Chris had been driving in his neighborhood and two children, one three and another four years of age had run out in front of his vehicle. Chris was not speeding. He stopped the car immediately. He called the police. But one of those children died. A complete accident.

For years, Chris had never been able to forgive himself. His forgiveness of Cameron, that night of the accident, was connected. But how? By a voice that signaled a kind of transaction. As if by some spiritual mathematics, sums were moved from one account to another, debts were being paid, as lives were hanging in the balance. At the very least, his heart shared a similar knowledge. It was conditioned, attuned, to the one in need of forgiveness. Some part of a previous debt made possible an announcement that would save another life.

Jesus made forgiveness the heart of his message. He knew that the moment when forgiveness is needed or offered, denied or withheld, is a turning point in the story of every soul on earth. Just as his life hung in the balance, quite literally, on a cross, he defined that crossroads with these two words: “forgive them.” Forgive them – for they know not what they do.

It is an interesting theological debate about how important the words that follow are: “for they know not what they do.” Would Jesus have forgiven them, even if they did know what they were doing? As much as any mortal’s knowledge, or any system, would allow that it was putting the Son of the living God to shame and death, I believe he would have.

Still, God demands that every soul be held accountable for its actions and impact on the world. We will be asked: what did we know and when did we know it. And why did we do that?! In the end, this accountability will require of each of us a profound reflection on what our relationships and loyalties have created in the world, what damage or good they have done.

Our sins hurt others. Our sins hurt us. To touch another human being is inevitably to end up in each other’s debt. Our days are determined by what we owe others. High Ho! High Ho! I owe. I owe. It’s off to work we go. Spiritually, it’s: We owe. We owe. It’s on our knees we go.

St. Paul concludes his greatest letter with this rhetorical thunder:

“Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written,

“As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.”

So then, each of us will be accountable to God.”

And so, before all else, Jesus taught us a prayer: Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who are indebted to us. The equivalency is there in the original. To be human is to be held accountable for our sins. To be loved is to be forgiven. We are saved by an equation, an exchange of love and forgiveness, a divine algorithm, a mathematics of grace. The only way our debts are relieved is when they are tied to our forgiving those who hurt us. Only in this balance does life go on, and renew, and when it has died, begin again.

As profound as this is, Jesus’ reply to Peter about how many times we should forgive is the stuff of comedy. Seven you say? Excellent guess! The rabbis suggested four would be enough. So you think seven? Let me tell you a story.

You are like a servant that owes me five times what Jeff Bezos and Bill Gates combined will make in a life time. You are in deep trouble. But I'm going to make you whole. Just don't let me catch you forgetting just how much you owed. And from now on, you do the same. Forgive? Yes. Forgive again? Just one more time. Until you get it right. And then again, until everyone is free.

Chris Williams and Cameron White are, to this day, very close. Family really. When they do get together they embrace and talk easily.

Still, Chris will say, now some 13 years later, that he sometimes wakes up angry and feels abandoned when he thinks of the tragedy and loss of that night. Even with the new life and family he has been given, he feels the pain and anguish of the life that never will be, like a lost limb, or the failing sense of hearing and sight.

In short, he knows he has forgiven Cameron. But every once in a while, he wakes up and knows he still has work to do. He has to forgive him just one more time.

How many times must I forgive, Peter asks? Until it is forgiven.

As followers of Jesus, pray that we learn how this math works! We forgive, and seek reconciliation, because we want to know the truth. And on any given day it means getting up, and forgiving all over again.

Forgive us our debts as we forgive those indebted to us. Until the kingdom comes. Until God's will is done. And all our debts, by his cross and passion, and the offering of our lives, are paid in full.