

20<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – Year C – October 10, 2010

Based on Luke 17:1-10 written by Pastor Paul Horn

“Forgiveness... Mission: Impossible? Made Possible through Jesus Christ.”

Why is it so hard to forgive people who offend us? First of all, most of the time we don't want to. And we're lazy. We'd rather stew about it. And it's hard to approach someone who has offended you and say, "I know that you have sinned against me. But I forgive you and Jesus forgives you." You'd rather tell them off. Because you feel that they do not deserve forgiveness for what they've done but rather they deserve a tongue lashing. We also like to blame it on our ethnicity, "Well, I'm German and we're stubborn!" You could use any nationality, "I'm African American, I'm Norwegian, I'm Hispanic or Asian, and we're stubborn people!" No you're not! You're not any of those. You are a child of God. And this is what Jesus requires from his children, vs3-4. "If your brother sins," don't tell everyone or pout about it. Rebuke him. The Apostle Paul says in his letter to Pastor Timothy that the Scriptures are useful for teaching, rebuking and correcting. (2Tim 3:16) Point out to a fellow believer where they have erred. It is our duty to do so. If they repent, forgive them! If they sin against you seven times in a day and repent and say, "I'm sincerely sorry for offending you," seven times forgive them. Forgive? Impossible! And yet Jesus says that it is your duty as a child of God to do so.

It's hard to forgive those who offend us, how much harder is it to forgive those who sin against our loved ones? vs1-2, "<sup>1</sup>Jesus said to his disciples: "Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come.<sup>2</sup>It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin. <sup>3</sup>So watch yourselves." Whoever causes one of this little ones to sin. Immediately we think of that 8-year-old girl who was kidnapped and assaulted before a stranger saw something that wasn't right about a situation and rescued the girl from her attacker. Not only are we talking about sexual abuse of little ones, but physical and emotional. Most of us would agree, "Those people deserve to be locked up!" I'm sure most of us have thought at one time or another, "If someone ever did that to my child, I'd kill them." As Jesus says, they deserve to have millstone hung around neck thrown into the sea!

Do you know what a millstone is? A wheel, hewn out of rock or stone. A small millstone was 22-29 inches in diameter, about 6inches thick. The larger millstones were 60inches in diameter. The stone had a round eye in the middle, into which a pole was placed and tied off. The other end of the pole was attached to a stationary wheel, and a donkey or ox would pull the millstone around and around allowing the millstone to crush the grain underneath. Whether Jesus talking about a large millstone which weighed 1400 pounds or the small one which weighed 350pounds, I think it would be sufficient to drag a person down to the bottom if the other end was tied around the neck and pushed off a cliff or a boat. Yes, those who cause little ones to sin deserve to have that done to them!

Before we're quick to point the finger... isn't Jesus also talking about me and you in these verses? Don't we cause little ones to sin? Since we're talking about forgiveness this morning... when we withhold forgiveness from our little ones, by continuing to harp on them

for their disobedience, by being harsh toward them, always reminding them, “You never listen!” or “You’re always goofing up!” don’t we cause them to sin? Or when we forgive them but then bring it up again and throw it in their face? Now, the Bible is very clear about disciplining children. Discipline is still necessary to teach our children that there are consequences for unacceptable behavior. Is not also, more important, that forgiveness and absolution be announced to that child? When we fail to bring the love of God into our homes, do we cause our children to sin?

Do we cause our little ones to sin when they see mom or dad or oma and opa not treating each other as God has outlined in his holy Word? They witness yelling and fighting and (hopefully not) abuse. It’s good for them to see mom and dad reconcile, to hear them say, “I’m sorry what I said to you.” But then, to hear that same parent, say to their partner, weeks, months, even years later, “You remember what you did!” Might the child wonder, “When mom or dad says, ‘I forgive you,’ do they really mean it? Does my Father in heaven really forgive me?”

When Jesus spoke of little ones, he wasn’t just talking about young in age, but young in the faith. Do we not cause those young in the faith to sin when they see us, who are supposedly “mature Christians” withholding forgiveness from a brother or sister in Christ, bringing up past faults to fellow Christians? Is this how a child of God acts?

Is forgiveness that hard? The disciples thought so. They even asked for an extra measure of faith! Jesus said, “That’s nonsense! Use the faith you already have!” To which we say, “I would need the faith of someone like Joseph who forgave his brothers for the awful things they did to him!” Jesus says, “Use the faith you already have.” Even if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, which, in the garden world is the smallest of seeds, you could say to his mulberry tree, (and you can picture Jesus gesturing to the tree standing 20feet into the sky), “Be uprooted and thrown into the sea!” And not just hurled into the sea, but be planted in the sea, where you can grow. Impossible! Sometimes we think that’s more possible than forgiving someone who offended us or our loved ones.

But God doesn’t understand! What he asks of us is impossible! Is not what we ask of God impossible? To forgive us of our sins as we forgive those who sin against us? That he should pardon us, who sin against him every single day? Who often make no effort to curb our sinful behaviors, who love to hate and be angry rather than show compassion and love, who cause others to fall into sin because we refuse to forgive them? It is more impossible that God forgive us.

Yet God makes the impossible possible. With God all things are possible (Mark 10:27), even the forgiveness of our sins. Although I am the one who deserves to have a rope tied around his neck attached to a millstone and hurled into the sea, he takes the noose off of my neck and ties my sins to that millstone and hurls them into the depths of the ocean, never to be seen again. Hear the Word of the LORD through his prophet Micah 7.19, “You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot, (like a millstone grinding wheat) and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.”

What love God has for me, that he would do the impossible for me! That out of his love, he would send his Son Jesus to love and show forgiveness to all the people in his life in a way that I cannot, that through his life he would win forgiveness for me! What love, that he would send his Son to do the impossible, pay for my sins! There on the cross your Savior removed the millstone that hung around your necks, the burden of my sins and your sins and the sins of the whole world, and hung them around his neck, and he allowed them to tug at his soul and drown him in God's wrath and justice until death.

What love, that God has for me, that he would do the impossible, forgive my sins! That he would grant me forgiveness through, what seems to be in the eyes of the world, impossible! Through a simple application of water connected with Christ's command, your sins are drowned, your sinful attitudes are washed away, forgiveness and eternal life are given, even to little babies. What love God has for me that through holy baptism he would remind me every day, that my sins have been pardoned by him, especially when I cause little ones to sin, and when I am guilty of withholding forgiveness. What love, that every day I can return to my baptism and tie a millstone around the neck of my wretched sinful nature, and drown him in the waters of baptism. What love God has for me, that through the washing with water and the Word he causes me to die to sin and to rise to righteousness. Through baptism, he changes my attitude and your attitude about forgiveness. That if my Father does the impossible for me, I will do the impossible for others. With God, I can and will accomplish all things, even uprooting a tree and planting it in the ocean? Yes. Even forgiving those who offend me? Yes. Forgiving those who sin against my loved ones? Yes. Even loving my children, my spouse, and those who are weak or new in faith? Yes. For my Father, through Christ Jesus, has forgiven me.

For seven years in the late 60s and early 70s a television show portrayed an elite covert operations unit which carried out highly sensitive missions subject to official denial in the event of failure, death or capture – Mission: Impossible. In one episode an elderly clergyman had been taken prisoner by an Eastern European country because the clergyman was a leader of the political opposition. He was being held in a prison where no escape had ever occurred. The unit posed as a small circus. The "circus" set up in a park next to the prison. One of the members of the team, posing as a member of the circus, is arrested after stealing the wallet of an audience member. He is taken to the prison has manages to smuggle in a lock-pick that enables him to exit his cell. The operative manages to get to the clergyman to warn him to expect an escape attempt, with the circus providing a distraction. But, as the escape attempt unfolds, the cardinal is gone from his cell -- he has been taken to solitary confinement and will be executed within a day or two. Mission: Impossible.

Jesus said, "If your brother sins, rebuke him, if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, "I repent," forgive him." Mission: Impossible? Not at all. God makes all things possible through your Savior Jesus. Since your Father has done the impossible, forgiven you of your sins, he will empower you to do the impossible. May he grant it to us for Jesus' sake. Amen.