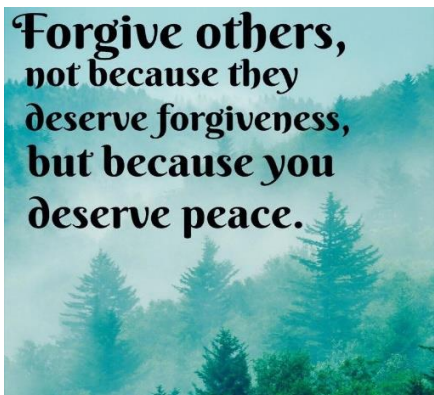


**SEPTEMBER 17, 2023**  
**SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER**  
**PENTECOST**  
***"FORGIVENESS"***



**ST. JOHN UNITED  
CHURCH OF CHRIST**  
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*Liturgist – Rev. Dr. Cheryl A. Lindsay*  
*Ushers –*

(NCH) New Century Hymnal - CCLI LICENSE  
#11164431

\*Please stand if comfortably able  
Respond when words are in bold

**ANNOUNCEMENTS:**

PRELUDE: "Song of Trust" Bertha R. Frick

PENNIES FOR MISSION: Maui Relief Fund

**\*CALL TO WORSHIP: (Inspired by Psalm 103)**

One: Bless the Holy One with our whole selves. Praise the Maker of our being!

**Many: Remember the mighty deeds and the good works of our God.**

One: The Sovereign One endows us with many gifts and equips us to do good work.

**Many: Remember the mighty deeds and the good works of our God.**

One: Holy Love entered the world without condemnation but with grace and forgiveness, mercy and compassion, redemption and restoration.

**Many: Hallelujah! We give thanks for the mighty deeds and the good works of our God!**

**\*PRAYER OF INVOCATION:**

God who calls, it is you who gathers us together and forms us as a community. It is you who

makes us uniquely individual and who designs us for companionship. Let us journey together this day in your presence reminded of our interdependence with one another. May we see your glory and be inspired to demonstrate your goodness and care through our lives. Amen.

**\*OPENING HYMN NCH 23**

**“There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy”**

**\*CALL TO CONFESSION:**

Why do we pass judgment on our brothers and sisters? Why do we quarrel with those whose ways are different from our own? How can we despise another who is also a child of God? How can we ignore the suffering of other human beings? Surely we have much to confess too or God.

**\*UNISON PRAYER FOR TRANSFORMATION AND NEW LIFE:**

**God of grace, we need your strength in our weakness. We**

**confess that we can be judgmental and hyper-critical of our neighbors, family, and friends. We project our own shortcomings on others in order to deflect attention from our mistakes. We withhold and condition forgiveness, mercy, and grace from those who wrong us at the same time we seek it for the wrongs we have done. Even still, we struggle to forgive ourselves. You have shown us the better way.**

**Help us to follow your path—receiving and extending forgiveness in a world in need of an infusion of grace for transformation. In your mercy, O God, hear our prayer, and let us forgive as you forgive. Amen.**

**\*WORDS OF GRACE:**

Beloved, grace has always been part of God’s relationship with humanity. God does not want you condemned or held captive by unresolved anger leading to bitterness. Rather, Creator desires you to be released as both forgiven and forgiver so

that all may live a life that is whole, free, and flourishing.

**\*GLORIA:**

**Glory to the Creator,  
and the Christ and the Spirit so  
near.**

**As it was from the start so it  
shall be forever,**

**One God always here. (repeat)  
(end) One God always here.**

**One God always here.**

**SCRIPTURE LESSONS: Exodus  
14:19-31**

<sup>19</sup> God's messenger, who had been in front of Israel's camp, moved and went behind them. The column of cloud moved from the front and took its place behind them. <sup>20</sup> It stood between Egypt's camp and Israel's camp. The cloud remained there, and when darkness fell it lit up the night. They didn't come near each other all night.

<sup>21</sup> Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The LORD pushed the sea back by a strong east wind all night, turning the sea into dry land.

The waters were split into two. <sup>22</sup> The Israelites walked into the sea on dry ground. The waters formed a wall for them on their right hand and on their left. <sup>23</sup> The Egyptians chased them and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and cavalry. <sup>24</sup> As morning approached, the LORD looked down on the Egyptian camp from the column of lightning and cloud and threw the Egyptian camp into a panic. <sup>25</sup> The LORD jammed their chariot wheels so that they wouldn't turn easily. The Egyptians said, "Let's get away from the Israelites, because the LORD is fighting for them against Egypt!"

<sup>26</sup> Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea so that the water comes back and covers the Egyptians, their chariots, and their cavalry." <sup>27</sup> So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. At daybreak, the sea returned to its normal depth. The Egyptians were driving toward it, and

the LORD tossed the Egyptians into the sea. <sup>28</sup>The waters returned and covered the chariots and the cavalry, Pharaoh's entire army that had followed them into the sea. Not one of them remained. <sup>29</sup>The Israelites, however, walked on dry ground through the sea. The waters formed a wall for them on their right hand and on their left.

<sup>30</sup>The LORD rescued Israel from the Egyptians that day. Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. <sup>31</sup>Israel saw the amazing power of the LORD against the Egyptians. The people were in awe of the LORD, and they believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses.

**EPISTLE LESSON: Romans 14:1-12**

**Welcoming each other like Christ**

**14** Welcome the person who is weak in faith—but not in order to argue about differences of opinion. <sup>2</sup>One person believes in

eating everything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. <sup>3</sup>Those who eat must not look down on the ones who don't, and the ones who don't eat must not judge the ones who do, because God has accepted them. <sup>4</sup>Who are you to judge someone else's servants? They stand or fall before their own Lord (and they will stand, because the Lord has the power to make them stand). <sup>5</sup>One person considers some days to be more sacred than others, while another person considers all days to be the same. Each person must have their own convictions. <sup>6</sup>Someone who thinks that a day is sacred, thinks that way for the Lord. Those who eat, eat for the Lord, because they thank God. And those who don't eat, don't eat for the Lord, and they thank the Lord too. <sup>7</sup>We don't live for ourselves and we don't die for ourselves. <sup>8</sup>If we live, we live for the Lord, and if we die, we die for the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we belong to God. <sup>9</sup>This is why Christ died and

lived: so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living. <sup>10</sup> But why do you judge your brother or sister? Or why do you look down on your brother or sister? We all will stand in front of the judgment seat of God. <sup>11</sup> Because it is written,

*As I live, says the Lord, every knee will bow to me, and every tongue will give praise to God.*

<sup>12</sup> So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.

**\*GOSPEL LESSON: Matthew 18:21-35**  
**Parable of the unforgiving servant**

<sup>21</sup> Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Should I forgive as many as seven times?"

<sup>22</sup> Jesus said, "Not just seven times, but rather as many as seventy-seven times.

<sup>23</sup> Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted

to settle accounts with his servants. <sup>24</sup> When he began to settle accounts, they brought to him a servant who owed him ten thousand bags of gold. <sup>25</sup> Because the servant didn't have enough to pay it back, the master ordered that he should be sold, along with his wife and children and everything he had, and that the proceeds should be used as payment. <sup>26</sup> But the servant fell down, kneeled before him, and said, 'Please, be patient with me, and I'll pay you back.' <sup>27</sup> The master had compassion on that servant, released him, and forgave the loan.

<sup>28</sup> "When that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him one hundred coins. He grabbed him around the throat and said, 'Pay me back what you owe me.'

<sup>29</sup> "Then his fellow servant fell down and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I'll pay you back.' <sup>30</sup> But he refused. Instead,

he threw him into prison until he paid back his debt.

<sup>31</sup> “When his fellow servants saw what happened, they were deeply offended. They came and told their master all that happened. <sup>32</sup> His master called the first servant and said, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you appealed to me. <sup>33</sup> Shouldn’t you also have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?’ <sup>34</sup> His master was furious and handed him over to the guard responsible for punishing prisoners, until he had paid the whole debt.

<sup>35</sup> “My heavenly Father will also do the same to you if you don’t forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

These are the ancient words revealed to us anew.

**Thanks be to God.**

**MESSAGE: “ Forgiveness”**

JUST TO REVIEW WHAT WE TALKED ABOUT LAST SUNDAY, THE SETTING OF CHAPTER 18 IN THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW IS NOT THE LIFE OF THE HISTORICAL JESUS BUT THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH THAT CAME INTO BEING AFTER EASTER.

THESE READINGS FROM CHAPTER 18 PRESUPPOSE THE EXISTENCE OF CONGREGATIONS THAT GATHER AT TIMES TO HANDLE DISPUTES AND OFFENSES AMONG MEMBERS. SUCH TEACHINGS TO JESUS’ DISCIPLES DURING HIS EARTHLY MINISTRY WOULD HAVE BEEN USELESS AND CONFUSING.

TO BEGIN WITH, THERE WERE NO ORGANIZED CHURCHES DURING THE EARTHLY LIFE OF JESUS. SO, THE PROBLEMS BEING ADDRESSED IN THIS CHAPTER OF MATTHEW DID NOT EXIST **YET**. THESE INSTRUCTIONS WERE ADDED AT A LATER TIME.

HOWEVER, THESE PASSAGES ARE HELPFUL TO US NOW IN ORGANIZED CHURCHES LAST OURS. **Plus** THE SUBJECT OF FORGIVENESS, IS ALWAYS A GOOD DISCUSSION TO HAVE. MANY OF US, INCLUDING MYSELF, DO NOT FORGIVE AS OFTEN AS WE SHOULD.

STARTING WITH VERSE 21, “THEN PETER SAID TO JESUS, “LORD, HOW MANY TIMES SHOULD I FORGIVE MY BROTHER OR SISTER WHO SINS AGAINST ME? SHOULD I FORGIVE AS MANY AS SEVEN TIMES?”

I THINK MOST PEOPLE HAVE HEARD ABOUT THIS QUESTION FROM PETER, ALTHOUGH WE’RE NOT QUITE SURE OF THE FUZZY MATH. A RABBINIC TRADITION SAID THREE TIMES. PETER IS BEING GENEROUS BY SAYING SEVEN TIMES.

**MORE IMPORTANTLY, JESUS SAYS FORGIVENESS DOES NOT COUNT THE TIMES. NO ONE IS KEEPING SCORE?**

WHEN JESUS SAYS YOU MUST FORGIVE SEVENTY-SEVEN TIMES,

ANCIENT VERSIONS TRANSLATE THE GREEK AS BEING SEVENTY TIMES SEVEN.

**AS YOU CAN SEE JESUS IS SIMPLY DRAMATIZING THE POINT THAT FORGIVENESS IS UNLIMITED. DESPITE THE FUZZY MATH, WE NEED TO PAY ATTENTION.**

JESUS USES METAPHORS, PARABLES, AND EXAGGERATIONS TO HELP HIS LISTENERS UNDERSTAND HOW LARGE GOD’S FORGIVENESS IS.

PREACHING SCHOLAR THOMAS LONG DESCRIBES THIS PARABLE LIKE THIS.

“TO UNDERSCORE JESUS’ POINT, HE TELLS A RIP-ROARING TALE ABOUT FORGIVENESS, A PARABLE INVOLVING CIRCUMSTANCES SO EXAGGERATED THAT SURELY HIS LISTENERS FOUND IT TREMENDOUSLY AMUSING.

THE FUN BEGINS IN THE OPENING SCENE, WHEN A KING, SETTLING ACCOUNTS WITH HIS SLAVES DISCOVERS ONE SUCH

VASSAL WHO IS ON THE BOOKS WITH A DEBT OF TEN THOUSAND TALENTS.

SINCE A SLAVE, EVEN ONE BELONGING TO THE KING, WAS HARDLY A HIGH-POWERED WAGE EARNER AND A **SINGLE TALENT WAS WORTH MORE THAN FIFTEEN YEARS' WORTH OF TYPICAL DAILY WAGES AND THIS SLAVE WAS IN DEBT OF TEN THOUSAND TALENTS.** MY MATH IS ALSO FUZZY SO I DON'T KNOW HOW MANY YEARS IT WOULD TAKE TO WORK OFF 10,000 TALENTS, BUT I THINK IT WOULD LONGER THAN THE SLAVES LIFETIME.

“SO WE HAVE HERE AN OUTLANDISH DEBT, IN FACT, ONE UNIMAGINABLY LARGE. AN EGYPTIAN PHARAOH COULDN'T COME UP WITH TEN THOUSAND TALENTS, MUCH LESS A SLAVE. THE SITUATION IS SOMETHING LIKE OUR SAYING THAT A LOWLY MAIL-ROOM CLERK OWED THE CEO OF IBM A “BAZILLION DOLLARS.” (DR. LONG WROTE THIS IN 1997.)

IT WAS HARD TO KNOW WHO WAS MORE FOOLISH – THE SLAVE, FOR GETTING INTO THAT SIZE DEBT, OR THE **KING, GIVING THAT SORT OF CREDIT LINE TO A SLAVE.**

IN ANY CASE, THE KING, REALIZING THAT REPAYMENT WAS OUT OF THE QUESTION, ATTEMPTS AT LEAST TO CUT HIS LOSSES BY ORDERING THE SLAVE TO BE SOLD, ALONG WITH THE SLAVE'S FAMILY AND ALL HIS WORDLY GOODS.

**“THE SECOND LAUGH COMES WHEN THE SLAVE, REALIZING HIS DESPERATE PREDICAMENT, FALLS TO HIS KNEES AND BEGS FOR AN EXTENSION ON HIS LOAN, ‘HAVE PATIENCE WITH ME, AND I WILL PAY YOU EVERYTHING’.** RIGHT!

THE KING MUST HAVE BEEN AMUSED AS WELL, BECAUSE HE RESPONDED TO THIS RIDICULOUS REQUEST WITH AN EVEN MORE PREPOSTEROUS RESPONSE. HE FORGAVE THE DEBT – EVERY LAST PENNY OF IT – AND SET THE SLAVE FREE. NO THREATS, NO RECRIMINATIONS,



NOTHING. **JUST EXTRAVAGANT FORGIVENESS, PURE AND FREE.**”

THE BIBLICAL SCHOLAR A.R.S. KENNEDY DREW THIS VIVID PICTURE TO CONTRAST DEBTS.

“SUPPOSE THEY WERE PAID IN small coins like dimes. THE 100-DENARII DEBT COULD BE CARRIED IN ONE POCKET. THE 10,000-TALENT WOULD TAKE AN ARMY OF ABOUT 8,600 CARRIERS TO CARRY IT, EACH CARRYING A SACK OF COINS 60 POUNDS IN WEIGHT; AND THEY WOULD FORM, AT A DISTANCE OF A YARD APART, A LINE FIVE MILES LONG!”

Another contrast TO GIVE US AN IMAGE OF HOW OFTEN WE SHOULD FORGIVE would be water in the largest ocean we can think of and an eyedropper. God’s forgiveness is the ocean and the size of forgiveness we give others is a drop.

WHICH IMAGE IMPRESSES YOU THE MOST? THAT’S WHAT METAPHORS AND PARABLES ARE INTENDED TO DO. THEY ARE INTENDED TO CAPTURE OUR

ATTENTION, SO WE UNDERSTAND GOD’S LESSON.

Here’s a realistic image. How often do we sin against God? As we know, a sin is anytime we move away from God. Anytime we idolize money; watch television instead of volunteering at a thrift store; spend money on fancy cars or boats instead of donating that money to a worthwhile charity; or when we’re arrogant or overly secure or forgetting about the homeless people or the food pantry.

IN OTHER WORDS, Anytime or anything that moves our hearts away from God is a sin. (SAY IT AGAIN) That represents a “bazillion” ways we insult our God who **gives us everything and forgives all our sins if we just ask.**

“Jesus, forgive our debts as we forgive our debtors.” We say it all the time. Do we mean it? Amen.

**SPECIAL MUSIC:**

**“Make Me a Channel of Your Peace”** Video

**PASTORAL PRAYER:** God of love. God of mercy. God of forgiveness. We come to you with heavy hearts. We worry about our family, our friends, our community, and our world. We feel helpless to try and conquer all hate, all violence, all oppression, all justice. And your answer is, “help just one and you are doing my will.”

As we help one, you, gracious God, help all who come to you. May we encourage more to come to you and you will receive them with open arms.

In the meantime, we pray. We pray for all people and especially those affected by earthly disasters such as the earthquakes in Morocco and the floods in Germany, Belgium, and other European countries. We pray for all victims and those affected.

We pray for all those who struggle with health issues. May they find comfort in knowing

that God is sending others to help them in anyway they know how; medical staff, rides to appointments, get well cards, phone calls, etc. We pray for all those on our prayer list.

Give us encouragement and strength to help others as you help us. Remind us to forgive as you forgive us. We pray in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ . . .

**THE LORD’S PRAYER: Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.**

**PRAYER RESPONSE: Three-fold Amen.**

**INVITATION TO GENEROSITY: IN OUR EPISTLE LESSON TODAY WE HEARD Romans 14:7 WHICH tells**

us, “We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves.” We are in covenant with God and joined in community with one another. Let us give of our resources as those who live for the good and well-being of all.

**OFFERTORY: “Don’t Forget to Pray”** R. C. Wilson

**\*DOXOLOGY:**

**Praise God from whom all blessings flow;  
Praise God, all creatures here below;  
Praise God above you heavenly host;  
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.**

**\*UNISON PRAYER OF DEDICATION AND THANKSGIVING:**

**Merciful God, receive our humble offerings as a testimony to your provision and a demonstration of our love. May they be magnified and multiplied for the benefit of our community and all creation.**

**\*CLOSING HYMN: NCH 457  
“Jesus, I Live to You”**

**After the benediction response and the bell rings, please remain in your seats to listen to the postlude.**

**\*BENEDICTION:**

May the love of God assure you, the hope of God guide you, and the peace of God sustain you as you go receiving and extending God’s grace in the world.

**\*BENEDICTION RESPONSE:**

**“Let There be  
Peace on Earth”**

**POSTLUDE: “Triumphal March”  
Edvard Grieg**