

Grace and peace to you from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, amen.

Forgiveness is such a sweet sounding word. We love the taste of it when we've done something wrong and our loved one, our friend, our co-worker lets us off the hook. Usually, by way of saying "it's ok," or "don't worry about it." But sometimes I wonder if such responses don't diminish the power we have at our disposal. A far more meaningful way to mend what becomes broken between us is to say the words, "I forgive you."

The word, "forgive," is almost a lost word and yet, it has an incredible healing ability in our lives and for others. We've all heard amazing stories of forgiveness. A child is murdered, a fortune stolen, a trust is broken and then there's a newsworthy report of forgiveness happening in such extraordinary circumstances. And we might think, "I could never do that." But here's our first lesson this morning: forgiveness is always possible.

That's not to say it's easy. It might be that when we think of forgiving someone, we begrudge to imagine that we are letting them *off the hook*, that we are in some way erasing a consequence for their actions. Or we feel we aren't in a place where we can just "forgive and forget." We can't forget what's happened. Pain is real. If you've experienced deep pain like this – whether you are the offended or the offender - then you know all too well the need for healing.

Secondly, forgiveness brings about a change or a repair in a relationship that was cracked and torn apart. There's no better example of this, of course, than of God's forgiveness for us. I don't need to go into all the ways that we fall short, but we do need to be reminded of just how profound God's forgiveness and love is for us.

It's why we asked you to turn and face the baptismal font during confession and forgiveness this morning. We've seen many baptisms at that font – baptism being one beginning place for relationship with God. That seemingly-not-so-important-but-nice-looking bowl of water is a continual reminder for us of a gift that can never be erased.

In the Large Catechism (4:77-79) Luther says about baptism:

Therefore baptism remains forever. Even though someone falls from it and sins, we always have access to it so that we may again subdue the old creature. But we need not have the water poured over us again. Even if we were immersed in water a hundred times, it would nevertheless not be

more than one baptism, and the effect and significance would continue and remain. Repentance, therefore, is nothing else than a return and approach to baptism, to resume and practice what has earlier been begun but abandoned.

Which is to say that baptism, and more so, all that it encompasses (love, forgiveness, acceptance, new life, etc.) that is the grounding of our identity with Christ, not our brokenness (sin.)

Because we are forgiven in Christ, we are then asked to forgive others. More than a charitable act (just being nice) more than a power move (if I forgive maybe I'll get something in return) more than a responsibility (like when we "should" do it) the practice of forgiveness is a way of living. If we are God's people, then we are forgiving people.

Matthew conveniently gives us a step by step guide for doing so. Remarkably, this story taught the people that forgiveness was in their hands. It was to be imbedded in the *community* rather than a hierarchy. We hold the power to forgive or not. We hold, what the church has traditionally called, "the keys of the kingdom" for one another.

There are of course, all kinds of questions about forgiveness. Does a person have to repent or be sorry? Does there have to be a change of heart? Is there anything that is unforgivable? If someone doesn't forgive me, then what? How do I keep forgiving someone if they keep hurting me?

But questions like these, rules, reason, logic don't really help us here. Forgiveness isn't governed by such words, but is an act of trust that transforms us and the other.

We step out on to new ground of hope that what is broken may be mended. We release the powerful grip that hurt holds over us. And in turn we discover we are worthy of being forgiven, and loving enough to forgive. It doesn't mean that everything becomes perfect, it doesn't always turn out that things are set back where they were – seldom actually. That's because we are often changed by brokenness that comes, but even then, forgiveness opens the possibility to each one to move on.

More recently, we are hearing a lot of the need to forgive ourselves. In recognition of our imperfection, we look for ways to move past the things we've done, the struggles we endure, the unworthiness we feel. Being grounded in holy forgiveness teaches us to embrace it for ourselves.

I am reminded of an old story from the life of Corrie Ten Boom who wrote the book "the Hiding Place." She was a prisoner in Ravensbruck, Germany during WWII. She ended up there because her family was helping and hiding Jewish people. But there was next to no help for her in prison. If you could just imagine for a moment the terribleness of such

a place, a place that took the life of her sister. Still, at the end of the war, as a free woman she traveled the world teaching about Christ and the need for forgiveness. At least until the day, after one of her talks, a man came up to her and stuck out his hand to shake hers wanting to thank her for the presentation. She froze, because there before her was one of the cruelest guards of the prison.

Those old wounds burst open again with painful memories of all that had happened. Anger and contempt swelled up in her – and now – she didn't need to repress it. She was free after all. And she describes how she stood there for what seemed a very long time, slowly realizing the hypocrisy of not forgiving him after just having spoken publicly of the importance of it. Still, she couldn't will herself to do it. "God help me," she said inside. And God did. She says it was God who raised her hand to meet his. God's forgiveness passed between them both, the intensity of the exchange changed her forever.

So be brave! Be intentional! Be forgiving as God is to us. Ask for God's help to let go whether it's the 7th time, or 7 million times, just keep relaxing that grip until it one day comes with ease. Let's not lose the language and practice of love and forgiveness.

Amen.