

Sermon for First Sunday in Lent
Reformation Lutheran Church
March 10, 2019
Matthew 18:15-35

Matt Metevelis

Grace and Peace to You from God our Father and from Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ

How many of you have taken a job and been involved in some kind of general orientation? You've been here then. It means sitting there and signing a bunch of consents and other forms, maybe watching a video or two, and most of all having somebody give the typical corporate pump you up kind of speech. What I want you to do now is imagine that you get brought into this company and on the first day the CEO comes in and gives a talk. And he or she says, "Okay now the first thing to remember in this company is that we don't want anyone trying to get ahead. We want you to be as useless as possible to the bottom line. Basically we want you to behave like a child here. And also, you're going to run into problems with people here so try and work it out with them. And if that doesn't work get some other people and maybe the company involved. But if that still doesn't work, don't worry – treat them like outsiders and be cool about it. Whatever you want to do with people we'll write that down as corporate policy – just make sure that two of you think that it's a good idea. Even if you have to leave the company and start your own company I will be there with you. Oh, and people here will make you mad and do rotten stuff to you regularly. But you have to forgive them, every time. And if you don't you're fired. Let me tell you a little story about this so you get the point."

This pretty much describes Jesus' little pump up speech, his orientation presentation for this company he's starting called the church. When we hear it this way it sounds insane doesn't it? What about mission statements and goals and culture (shout out Zappo's) and all that stuff that's supposed to really matter? There's no structure here, no underlying sense of purpose. We don't hear talk about being "change-makers" or "transformative communities." Jesus envisions the church here as just a group of people who will very often butt heads and need to make up, a group of people who will share space and injure one another, a group of people who will require forgiveness up to seventy times the amount that sanity would advise if necessary. In short Jesus views the church as your average bunch of sinners – well maybe a little above average. For Jesus

the church is not some scrappy little start-up ready to take on the world, and it's not even a little dojo where people learn the spiritual arts of sacrificial love – it's a hospital – barely shielded from the world – where people have their wounds healed even as more wounds get inflicted right inside the doors. We're not judged here on our ability to do things, we're not measured by the sharing of our spiritual gifts – but in the eyes of our crucified CEO we are tested by our constant need to forgive.

And it is a hard test. Seven times I should forgive my brother. Can you imagine getting wronged seven times by your brother (please don't call mine he's working today)? That's a lot of forgiving. That's past the limit. Not seven. Seventy times seven. Can we just say I forgive you? No. Forgive from the heart. There can be a big disconnect I think in the church when we talk about forgiving in the church. I think we love to talk about "forgiveness" – a noun, a thing, a quality, an idea. We hear about the "forgiveness" of God, the "forgiveness" we find in the cross, the "forgiveness" we are called to do in our lives – all that good stuff. But you know what is downright scary – the word Jesus actually uses – "forgive" verb – for you grammar Nazis – the imperative mood which means (command). Yep. This is the scary one – the verb. The thing we have to do. Forgive the person who cuts you off in traffic. The one you barely know from jr. high who bounced on your social media post to say offensive things. Forgive the one that abused your trust. The one who lied about you. The one who cut you apart for trying to help them. The one who walked out on you out of the blue. The one who said things so hurtful that they cut you to the core and still echo in your head to this day. The one who hurt your child. The one who stole from you. The one who slammed the door in your face when you were just looking for help. The ones who talked about you behind your back. Forgiveness as a noun is a safe nice concept. Forgiving – the verb – the duty that stands between you and your neighbor while your heart is still broken or your body is still bleeding – that is the real test.

But as tough as all this is Jesus doesn't say all of it just to freak us out, or to make us feel ashamed. And most of all I don't think that Jesus is saying this to make demands on us to forgive people when we simply cannot. I've talked with so many patients and family members too who expect that the deathbed will force someone to either offer or accept forgiveness. Jesus is clear. Forgiveness is from the heart – if it is not in the heart it cannot truly be given. I do not think Jesus is just laying down some law we need to

follow, or giving us a test we need to pass – indeed Jesus himself broke that curve on the cross. Jesus is instead telling us something about ourselves. Life accumulates. These little disappointments, these slights, these regrets, these rejections, these wounds, these grudges – they all have a way of piling up in our lives. They live in places deep down in our psyche. They cause us to stumble, they fill us with fear, they cause us to build a rigid armor against the world, they keep us from the relationships that make life meaningful. Nineteen hundred years before psychology was invented Jesus knew that shame and trauma shaped who we are and could adversely impact the way we lived our lives. All this baggage keeps us from being free. And this is precisely the problem with this ungrateful slave in our parable today. The mercy of his master made him free only in terms of his pocketbook – the violent shakedown he gave to his neighbor showed that his heart was still in chains. The freedom he received produced only a desire not to be back in bondage again. The slave had his debt removed but not his baggage.

(story)

And so this is what Jesus is asking us to do – be free of our baggage. If you've ever been to a really nice hotel you'll notice that the first thing they do after you check in is send someone for your bags. This is who Jesus longs to be for us. The one who takes all our baggage. The one who bears our baggage on his body. The one who takes with us all those slaps of abuse. The one who gets directed at him all the taunts that were meant for us. The one who finds us whenever the report card, the score card or the evaluation said we weren't good enough and says this one is mine and worth dying for. Jesus is the one who stands with us and with our families when we hear that bad news from the doctor to speak promises of life. Jesus is the one who calls us away from our status, our pride, our ego, and all those things that we falsely think define who we are and shows us what it means to live for others instead. Jesus is the one who tells us that life is short for grudges, who longs to heal our broken relationships, who binds our wounds from the people we've had to let go of or let go of us. All that baggage gets heavy, and it gets to be too much. And Jesus longs to bear it – and does bear it for you bringing all of it to an end. There is no room in your life for Jesus and your baggage. Even though your baggage might push him out this is a battle that Jesus wins right there (cross). And this is the business of the church – we are in the baggage removal business. Our job is to make the entire world see that all the bags, all the burdens, all the

wounds and scars have been loaded onto the cross shaped cart of our Lord and bell-hop who is busy constantly carrying them away. And this doesn't go anywhere unless we see it ourselves. So whatever you're giving up for Lent, may I humbly suggest in the words of our CEO, that you give whatever bags you are carrying a good toss.

Amen