Text: Matthew 18:21-35

**Introduction**

Yesterday on the Jewish calendar was Rosh Hoshana. That’s the formal Jewish New Year that celebrates the creation. And it opens up a 10 day season that ends with Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. The Talmudic story is that three books are opened yearly. The book of life, the book of the damned and the indeterminate. Those in the book of life are sealed immediately. The damned likewise are known. The indeterminate are given the 10 days to repent. Their fate sealed on Yom Kippur.

Now that calendar is a lunar calendar, so the days are moveable, like Easter. But I found the juxtaposition of those with our gospel reading meaningful. The are both thinking about forgiveness and how we are forgiven.

**Literal**

Our Gospel text follow immediate on last weeks, which restated the office of the keys, “whatever you bind on earth is bound in heaven, whatever you loose on earth is loosed in heaven.” And that was given as something of a summary of how to handle sin within the church. The point always being to bring the sinner to repentance. I honestly don’t know if it is a thing, but I could imagine the 10 days between Rosh Hoshana and Yom Kippur being the days to make right. I doubt that was the practice simply because Jewish theology tends to be around the whole people and not the individuals, but the idea of having a formal time to seek out reconciliation sounds like wisdom. No more arguments over who goes first, or waiting for the other, or waiting for it just to be forgotten, or any of the other games we tend to play. Saying, you’ve got a formal 10 days to clear up any indeterminacy, could be a terrible law, it could also be the spur that many need. I suppose the Christian corollary would have been the old Ars Moriendi, the art of dying, which was not about managing morphine levels but taking care of things that needed to be done in earnest.

But putting aside speculation, what the disciples, repped by Peter, want to know is how often do you do this? And Peter picks out the lower possible number of completeness – “As many as seven times?” Peter’s logic is understandable. Maybe by our thoughts even graceful. Our proverb is fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice, shame on me. If we let someone cheat us or otherwise sin against us more than that one time, it is we who are the fools. Peter’s offer of seven is full.

But Jesus’ answer, if we are being honest with ourselves is shocking. “I tell you not seven times, but seventy times seven.” A fullness times a larger fullness. And I suppose I could be wrong, but Jesus isn’t saying keep a spreadsheet on everybody. His response is to say, if they ask, forgive. In that way what Jesus tells us is probably more about God than it is about us. Because even if we were keeping a spreadsheet, we’d lose count before 70 x 7. Or we’d lose the file. Or the software would upgrade and we couldn’t convert it. But God would never have those problems. He knows.

And it is exactly when Jesus is revealing to us something about the Father or Himself that he moves into the parables. You can imagine it is those 10 days between Rosh Hoshana and Yom Kippur. The King is taking the books out and it is time to settle them. And one is brought before him who owes 10,000 talents. Now again that is just a stupid amount. Roughly the national debt, you know, something that is never getting paid back. If there is anyone whose name is getting written in that book of the damned, it is this guy. And the King is fully justified in liquidating everything – wife, children, all that he had – to get something back. But the man begs the King for more time. Notice that he doesn’t throw himself on the grace of the King. He just begs for more time. King, put my name in that indeterminate book. I’ll make it good.

**Christology**

But that is not how the king asks. While that man was still in debt. What he was still thinking he’d pay off the national debt. The King does two things. First he has pity on him. This is the same verb I called out at the feeding of the 5000 – splagnizomai – his guts were churned. The King looks at the man’s condition and a deep emotion overcomes him. This is the always the response of Christ over our sinful lostness, over the debt we owe. So large, and yet we often have no idea. We think we can still pay it. Just be patient with us. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. While in his heaven his guts were churned over the state of his creation. And unlike what we often do, fall back, do something minor and symbolic to assuage our guilt, but talk ourselves out of real dramatic action. Christ enters our world.

And entering our world, he pays the debt. The King in the parable, after having pity forgives the debt. And imagine for a second forgiving something that large. We’ve been having massive political arguments over forgiving student loan debt. And rightly. 10,000 talents is enough to be felt even by the king. In reality it was felt in nail and spear and thorn. But the debt is paid. We are free of it.

**Moral**

The debt is paid. The debt of all sinners. The debt of all sin. Yours included. That of your enemy. In Christ the debt is gone. And it is credited to our account when we believe it.

I think that is the point of the rest of the parable. This servant didn’t believe it. Because if you’ve been forgiven the national debt, are you really going to immediately go choke someone over $20,000? It’s not that 100 denarii – 100 days wages – are a small amount. It’s what it signals that the guy is trying to do. He’s got his list of everyone who owes him. And this is probably the biggest number. But he’s going out and raising the money. He’s going to work his list. Because he doesn’t believe the King has forgiven his debt.

And working that list is extracting everything we can. An eye for an eye. A sin for a sin. A grudge for a grudge. An evil eye for an evil eye. Keeping that spreadsheet up to date not on how many times we’ve forgiven, but what we are justified in extracting from someone who has harmed us. And we are much better at keeping those, much more diligent. Maybe even seizing and choking.

The person who has accepted that their debt is forgiven is called to follow the example. “Should you not have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?” That’s the teaching that Jesus is giving to Peter and to us. It’s what is embedded in the Lord’s Prayer – “Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” Our debts have been forgiven. Are we willing to pick up the cross and follow. To forgive those who owe us? If we believe, if by faith that forgiveness has been credited to us. We also by faith need to forgive. Even 70 x 7

**Eschatological**

Now I do want to make two observations about limitations and extents. The mercy of Jesus is universal – for all sinners, for the world. The King, while the servant was saying he’d pay it, had mercy. But everyone in the parable are fellow servants, are servants of the King. It is the fellow servants the report to the King. If our brother comes seeking forgiveness, give it to him. And yes we have to balance this with the commands to “love your enemies”, but the unlimited forgiveness the Jesus is proclaiming is toward fellow servants – to brothers and sisters. Within the church we serve the same Crucified King. Within the church we know that the entire thing begins with forgiveness. And within the church we must be willing to pay the temporary price of love, because this is the example of Jesus. But we are not called to be Christ ourselves. We are not bound by the same with the world. The world does not believe in forgiveness. It is not seeking the forgiveness. Treating the world according to its wisdom has a place.

Yet the promise is that whatever we forgive on earth is forgiven in heaven. And do we wish to see someone in that eternal jail because of us, if we had it within our power to forgive the debt?

This is the imitation of Christ. It will certainly cost us in this world. And maybe the cost is more than we can pay. But we should remember the beatitudes and their promises. Blessed are the merciful, the peacemakers, those reviled falsely. Great is you reward is heaven. When we imitate Christ in his forgiveness, the Father repays. And the blessings of the Father are beyond description. Amen.