



**FIRST CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**
235 South Kenilworth Avenue, Elmhurst, IL
Partners in Christ's Service since 1890

SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
At Home or Small Group Worship for September 20, 2020

OPENING HYMN – *audio available on the church website*

Meg McGarry, vocals
Dave Benziger, guitar

#97 Fairest Lord Jesus

Fairest Lord Jesus,
ruler of all nature,
O thou of God to earth come down;
thee will I cherish,
thee will I honor,
thou, my soul's glory, joy, and crown.

Fair are the meadows,
fairer still the woodlands,
robed in the blooming garb of spring:
Jesus is fairer,
Jesus is purer,
who makes the woeful heart to sing.

Fair is the sunshine,
fairer still the moonlight,
and all the twinkling, starry hosts:
Jesus shines brighter,
Jesus shines purer,
than all the angels heaven can boast.

CALL TO WORSHIP

Christ welcomed those who differ, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions.

For God welcomes all, and yearns for us to do our best.

Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be

alike.

Let all be fully convinced in God's undying love.

To live fully is to live fully in Christ.

So then, whether we live or whether we die, we belong to Christ.

OPENING PRAYER

Compassionate-One, Lover-of-Goodness, draw near to us. Surround us with confidence in your good news: that you love us as parents love their children; that your mercy is boundless and generous, that you beckon us always, and will wait forever as we find our way back to you. Open our hearts to receive your compassion, and then, show us how to forgive. So that we may be vessels of hope in our troubled world. In Jesus' name. Amen.

GLORIA PATRI

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son

And to the Holy Ghost: as it was in the beginning

Is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen, amen.

PRAYERS OF THE CHURCH

Prayer Hymn #263

Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place,

I can feel his mighty power and his grace;

I can hear the brush of angels' wings,

I see glory on each face;

Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place.

Silent Prayer

PASTORAL PRAYER – *audio available on the church website*

Rev. Mike Daly

(We continue to remember those who are suffering the effects of the wild fires on the west coast and those in the path of hurricanes in the south)

Merciful Spirit, we lift our heartfelt words - spoken and unspoken - seeking to praise you. You forgive our sins, and you never stop working to restore us to fullness and wholeness. Because of your great love for us, your grace does not let us off the hook. Give us the courage we need to repent fully of our wrongdoings. Help us remember that we belong to your realm and that our lives and actions always need to move toward you.

God of Love, we pray to you - not with lists and petitions of our demands. You are

not a genie or robot at our beck and call. We open our hearts eager to serve others in your name - with a readiness to improve family life, community well-being, and the environment. Let us not disregard the fullness of your character, thus impoverishing our relationship with you. You are the one who listens, who laughs, weeps, and holds us when nothing else will do. We seek to embody that same love.

Ever-present Spirit, we lift prayers for those whose labors barely make ends meet and cannot afford life's necessities. We pray for those who serve the greater good and commit themselves to build up others. We lift up students, teachers, support staff, and custodians. We lift up first responders and give thanks for police officers, firefighters, and healthcare workers. We lift those whose minds and spirits are weary and worn down. We pray for those experiencing sudden loss and life changes. We lift up those who are ill or recovering from surgery. Lord, we ask that you give these, your children, strength, comfort, and assurance that they are not alone.

May your blessings waken us to honor one another without judgment and seek the well-being of all. Plant a vision of the new creation within us where your will, desire, and love reign, now and forever. We pray, through Christ, our Lord, amen.

OUR LORD'S PRAYER – *audio available on the website* Michelle Maiers, vocals

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 sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

CHILDREN'S MESSAGE – *audio available on the church website* Martha Mendoza

SCRIPTURE – *audio available on the church website* Jeff Morrow

Matthew 18:21-35 (NIV)

The Parable of the Unmerciful Servant

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?"

Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times."

Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

At this the servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded.

His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.’

But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

“This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

SERMON – *audio available on the church website*

Rev. Mike Daly

As We Forgive . . .

Our scripture this morning contains two parts: a dialogue between Jesus and Peter and a parable. Both are about the idea of forgiveness. Grace is a central truth of the Christian faith. After all, isn’t the church first and foremost about forgiveness and mercy? As the German poet Heinrich Heine once said, “Of course God will forgive me, that’s God’s business.”

Simon Peter’s job often is to bring up the subjects everyone else is too polite to mention. So Peter asks, “How many times do we have to forgive?” Peter wants some boundaries within which he can practice the Christian way. He wants to know the

limits. The usual tradition is three strikes and you're out, so Peter is being charitable when he suggests seven times. But instead of complimenting Peter, Jesus says a much larger number. Peter doesn't believe his ears, "Did you say seventy-seven?!"

Seven is the number for perfection in the ancient world, so when Peter says, "seven times," he is really asking whether Jesus expects perfection of him - *perfect* forgiveness. That is to say, does Jesus expect forgiveness characteristic of God? Does Jesus expect perfect, unlimited forgiveness? Jesus' answer, "Not seven times, I tell you, but seventy-seven times," implies an infinite number of times. So the number of times a brother or sister sins against you is irrelevant because Jesus expects his followers to forgive one another - and even their enemies - *indefinitely*. (processandfaith.org/lectionaries/2014)

Then Jesus tells the story which has become known as the parable of the unforgiving servant. The story goes something like this: "During the annual audit, an accountant, who was hired because he had strong references, is a million dollars short.

He has obviously embezzled the money, so the boss initially decides to press charges. But the accountant falls on his knees and begs, 'Please, have patience with me. I'll pay you back somehow.' The boss starts figuring. The accountant's entire salary will not even pay the interest on a million dollar debt, to say nothing of paying off the principal. The boss sees little profit in taking the tiny amount the crooked servant can earn. He feels compassion for the man and his family, so the boss forgives the debt.

Then the story stops being warm and fuzzy. This same accountant has a friend who owes him twenty bucks. It is a tiny fraction of what he owes, but he is within his rights to demand payment. He is owed the money. He has every right to be repaid. And the law permits him to demand prison for the debtor until payment is made. So he has his colleague put in debtor's prison. Once the gracious king finds out about this servant's ungracious behavior, the king's mercy turns into ugly vengeance.

But, isn't our first reaction to this story - to be glad the ingrate servant is finally going to prison? How dare he act the way he does? How can he be treated so graciously and then treat someone else so callously? How can he receive such amazing forgiveness and offer no forgiveness of his own?

Or do we recognize that we do something like this all the time? It is seldom this dramatic, but we are not good at forgiveness. Real forgiveness is hard. So we get angry and quietly nurse our grudges. We get used to not feeling the need to forgive

others. After a while, it seems unnatural to try to be reconciled to those who've wronged us.

Bret Younger, from McAfee School of Theology in Atlanta, points out that, "What we do not see so clearly is the price of not forgiving. In this parable, Jesus may not be prescribing judgment so much as he is describing the harsh reality. When we fail to forgive, we choose prison. We choose to lock ourselves up in our bitterness."

There are some problems with this lectionary reading. The parable does not really fit the command that Jesus gives Peter. The king in the story only forgives his servant once.

If this is a parable about forgiving people "77" times, then why is it that the king only forgave once, then the next time he slips up, the king sent him off to be tortured? That feels like it's about "76" short of what Jesus is telling us to do.

Some of us have trouble with this parable because if the king is supposed to represent God, then the story makes the Holy One vengeful. We know that some religious traditions are perfectly happy with that point of view about God, but we are not.

Nadia Bolz-Weber argues that the hardest question that this scripture raises is what to do when our hearts cannot be filled with forgiveness and mercy because they are so filled with rage?

Bret Younger says, "Forgiveness is not pretending that nothing is wrong. To forgive is to say, 'You have done wrong, and by all rights, I should keep my distance from you. But because I remember my own shortcomings, I'm offering the forgiveness I have been given. I want to wish you well.' We forgive as God does, not winking at evil, but taking evil seriously and still opting for grace. Forgiving another doesn't mean we will forget what they have done, or that our wounds will completely heal, or that we will feel warm and fuzzy, but it does mean that we will see them in the light of God's forgiveness. Our choice is to live in the injustices we've suffered or in the mercy we have received. God doesn't ask us to create forgiveness out of nothing. God invites us to join in what God has already given, to cease swimming against the stream of grace. Forgiveness is not a single action, feeling, or thought so much as it is a constant practice, a hope, and a way of life. To receive forgiveness is to give thanks for God's grace; and to return that forgiveness to others is to live as God's children."

There is a story about a forest ranger at Yellowstone National Park who led a group of tourists into the forest to observe a grizzly bear safely. The ranger then began his talk about the grizzly's behavior by citing the grizzly bear as the strongest and most powerful creature in the park. He explained how a grizzly would often tear any animal to shreds if they crossed his path, especially while he was eating.

Just then, a skunk emerged from the woods and began to help himself to the bear's food. The grizzly made no attempt to stop him. The tourists asked the ranger why it was and how it was that the grizzly didn't tear the skunk to shreds. The ranger paused and said: "The grizzly learned long ago that it doesn't pay to mess with a skunk."

It doesn't pay to withhold forgiveness, it doesn't pay to nurse grudges, to wallow in bitterness, to maintain resentment, or to loathe one's enemies.

When Jesus told Peter he should forgive seventy-seven times, he was trying to keep Peter from suffering the consequences of withholding of forgiveness - and to keep Peter from being sprayed by the skunk of bitterness. May we all heed that that important wisdom. Amen.

OFFERTORY – *audio available on the church website*

*Our gifts of time, our gifts of talents, our gifts of money;
we offer you all we have to the building of your kingdom.*

Always Been Faithful

Meg McGarry, vocals and Dave Benziger, guitar

DOXOLOGY

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

CLOSING HYMN – *audio available on the church website*

Meg McGarry, vocals
Dave Benziger, guitar

#595 Be Thou My Vision

Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart;
naught be all else to me, save that thou art

thou my best thought, by day or by night,
waking or sleeping, thy presence my light.

Be thou my wisdom, and thou my true word;
I ever with thee and thou with me, Lord;
thou my redeemer, my love thou hast won,
thou in me dwelling, and I with thee one.

Riches I heed not, nor vain empty praise,
thou mine inheritance, now and always:
thou and thou only, first in my heart,
Great God of heaven, my treasure thou art.

Great God of heaven, my victory won,
may I reach heaven's joys, O bright heaven's Sun!
Heart of my heart, whatever befall,
still be my vision, O Ruler of all.

BENEDICTION

Go forth and be of good courage. Hold fast to that which is good. Render no one evil for evil. Strengthen the faint-hearted, support the weak, help the afflicted. Honor all people. Love and serve God, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit. Peace be with you, amen.