

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Being a disciple requires an expansive perspective on forgiveness. Today our perspective is broadened by the good news that God's forgiveness is not based on our idea of fairness, but rather on abundant, unimaginable grace. In the psalm, we hear that God "does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities." From the gospel, we hear that the king forgives our entire debt, no matter how enormous it is. We also are challenged to stretch our perspective and forgive each other. With Peter, we learn to stop keeping score.

It's not an easy thing to do. Again and again we fall back on limited human understandings of what is "fair." Looking at the story of Joseph and his brothers, it's easy for us to say that his brothers really didn't deserve forgiveness. Even their plea for forgiveness is dishonest and manipulative—have they *really* repented? Joseph takes the wider view and realizes that it isn't his brothers' intentions that matter, but God's. God's forgiveness is much greater than what is fair, what we deserve.

So what does this new, broadened perspective look like in our lives today? Our confession brings it home for us: we recognize that we act selfishly and place our own needs above our neighbors needs, we recognize that we fail to take the wider view. Paul clearly states the consequence of this recognition: "We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves." In all that we do, we are mutually responsible — to one another, to our neighbor's, to all of God's creation. We are joined to Christ in this duty and joy — both in sickness and in health, both in grief and celebration, both in times of isolation and experiences of community, both when it seems "fair" and when it does not. We are the Lord's.

Let Us Be Gathered

Confession and Forgiveness

Blessed be the holy Trinity, † one God,
who creates, redeems, and sustains us and all of creation.
Amen.

Let us confess our sin in the presence of God.
Silence is kept for reflection.

Faithful God,
have mercy on us.
We confess that we are captive to sin
and cannot free ourselves.
We turn from your loving embrace
and go our own ways.
We pass judgment on one another
before examining ourselves.
We place our own needs before those of our neighbors.
We keep your gift of salvation to ourselves.
Make us humble, cast away our transgressions,
and turn us again to life in you
through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.
Amen.

God hears the cries of all who call out in need,
and through his death and resurrection,
Christ has made us his own.
Hear the truth that God proclaims:

Your sins are forgiven in the name of † Jesus Christ.
Led by the Holy Spirit, live in freedom and newness
to do God's work in the world.
Amen.

Gathering Song

From the Northwest Washington Synod, we are gathered today in the music "Heaven Is Singing for Joy" (ELW #664). The video for today's gathering song was recorded at the end of August. We pray today for the people of the Northwest Washington Synod and all people and life in synods affected by the wildfires in the West Coast region. "For your life and mine unite in the love of our God. Porque a tu vida y la mía las une el amor de Dios."

Here is the video link: <https://youtu.be/47clhq1UJ1k>. (Portions of this hymn are sung in Spanish.)

ENGLISH

1 *Heaven is singing for joy, alleluia,
for in your life and mine
is shining the glory of God.*

Refrain

*Alleluia, alleluia!
Alleluia, alleluia!*

2 *Heaven is singing for joy, alleluia,
for your life and mine
unite in the love of our God. Refrain*

SPANISH

1 *El cielo canta alegría, ¡aleluya!,
porque en tu vida y la mía
brilla la gloria de Dios.*

Estrillo

*¡Aleluya, aleluya!
¡Aleluya, aleluya!*

2 *El cielo canta alegría, ¡aleluya!,
porque a tu vida y la mía
las une el amor de Dios. Estrillo*

Prayer of the Day

Let us pray.

O Lord God, merciful judge,
you are the inexhaustible fountain of forgiveness.
Replace our hearts of stone with hearts that love and adore you,
that we may delight in doing your will,
through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.
Amen.

Let Us Hear God's Word

A reading from Genesis:

¹⁵Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers said, "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?" ¹⁶So they approached Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this instruction before he died, ¹⁷'Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.' Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. ¹⁸Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, "We are here as your slaves." ¹⁹But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? ²⁰Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. ²¹So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones." In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them. (Genesis 50)

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

A reading from the Psalms:

⁸Lord, you are full of compassion and mercy,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love;
⁹you will not always accuse us,
nor will you keep your anger forever.
¹⁰You have not dealt with us according to our sins,
nor repaid us according to our iniquities.
¹¹For as the heavens are high above the earth,
so great is your steadfast love for those who fear you.
¹²As far as the east is from the west,
so far have you removed our transgressions from us.
¹³As a father has compassion for his children,
so you have compassion for those who fear you, O Lord.

A reading from Romans:

¹Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. ²Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. ³Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. ⁴Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

⁵Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. ⁶Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God.

⁷We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. ⁸If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. ⁹For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

¹⁰Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. ¹¹For it is written,

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

¹²So then, each of us will be accountable to God. (Romans 14)

Word of God. Word of life.

Thanks be to God.

*The holy gospel according to Matthew.
Glory to you, O Lord.*

²¹Peter came and said to [Jesus], “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” ²²Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

²³“For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; ²⁵and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. ²⁶So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ ²⁷And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’ ²⁹Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ ³⁰But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. ³¹When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. ³²Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ ³⁴And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. ³⁵So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.” (Matthew 18)

*The Gospel of the Lord.
Praise to you, O Christ.*

Reflection on the Readings

Today’s reading from Genesis comes at the conclusion of the turbulent story of Joseph. The scene into which we are drawn as witnesses is as complicated as it is dramatic. It’s unclear, frankly, whether Joseph’s brothers, fearing that Joseph’s mercy was guaranteed only by his love for his now-dead father, are telling the truth. Similarly, it’s unclear whether Joseph actually forgives them; at least, he never says so directly.

Ultimately, however, neither of those complications rules the day. Instead, Joseph recognizes two things critical to living into the open future which God desires for all of us.

First, it is God’s place to judge. That is not to say that our actions are uninformed by the behaviors and the character of others, and this passage is not a call to remain in abusive relationships or suffer injustice in the name of piety. It is not a call to continue to stand face-to-face with someone who chooses to not wear a face covering. Rather, Joseph’s question — “Am I in the place of God?” — is the recognition that final judgment is God’s. In the meantime, we are called to remain open to the possibility of redemption, both in others and ourselves.

Second, Joseph perceives that God can weave — from whatever strands of brokenness, heartache, or calamity we have suffered — a future that is, in the end, good. As Joseph sees it, this does not mean that God creates evil or suffering for the sake of some larger “plan.” That is not what this scene — or certainly the whole of Scripture — advocates.

Yes, the betrayal and the treachery of Joseph’s brothers is real. Yes, they intended to kill Joseph when they left him in a well. Yes, they plotted evil when they sold him into slavery. Yes, they plan to manipulate him even today through their words. But those actions are not God’s actions and not God’s intent for Joseph or for any of us. What is God’s relentless intent is to wring redemption and healing even from the most difficult of circumstances.

Today’s gospel reading also speaks of forgiveness. After Jesus teaches us how to deal with those who offend us, how, if ultimately necessary, to treat them like tax collectors and like Gentiles—sharing food with them, listening to their needs, their grief, their pain, and starting over with a new relationship,

Peter asks how many times we should enter into this process, before giving up. Trying to demonstrate the depth of his learning under Jesus, Peter suggests a scripturally and lawfully prescribed answer: seven. Jesus, however, stretches the legal requirement to the tipping point: not seven but seventy-seven. Or seventy times seven. Or, to put it in more common language, always.

Jesus then goes on to tell a story, a parable, about one who has just been forgiven an unimaginable amount yet cannot forgive another what is a trifling sum by comparison. The debt of ten thousand talents is really a debt beyond counting. A single, solitary talent is more than a slave could earn in 15 years. Allowing for the necessity to eat, to drink, to care for his family along the way, it is the debt of a lifetime. Ten thousand talents would take ten thousand lives to pay back. Working straight through from Jesus' day to our own, that slave would still be hard at it — only 9,930 or so lifetimes yet to go.

All of that forgiven. And what is the slave himself unable to forgive? The debt of 100 denarii. It is a trivial amount. We're not talking lifetimes to pay back any more. It is the amount that a slave could earn in 100 days. Big enough, sure. But nothing in comparison to 10,000 lifetimes. That is the comparison — and the teaching — that Jesus offers.

Of course our attention — shaped by a popular culture more interested in vengeance and hell than forgiveness and healing — is likely to get fixated on the last lines, where God's response to the unforgiving heart is compared to the unrelenting punishment of an angry overlord. But understand and remember this: hyperbolic exaggeration is characteristic of parables — absolutely no one lives up the demanded teaching! What is said here is meant to push and prod us. It is meant to drive us to a better future. It is meant to underscore the importance of forgiveness.

Why? Because, as the force of the parable makes clear, those who are unable to extend to others the mercy they have received from God are already ensnared, trapped, and doomed to a life of relentless calculations and emotional scarcity.

I know that I — and I suspect that each of you — have at one time or another gotten “stuck” by some offense or some personal slight and overlooked the manifold grace extended to me by countless others. Maybe it was someone cutting you off in traffic? Maybe it was having your expertise ignored at work? Maybe it's just that we can no longer do the “normal” things like meet for worship? Perhaps Jesus commands such extravagant forgiveness during these time because he knows it may take some of us that long for it to really sink home.

And so, for this reason, today's parable is one that speaks most powerfully when we address it first to ourselves rather than use it as a standard by which to judge others. The gospel message that Matthew share with us calls us to remember the events of 2000 years ago when God's own Son, surveying a field of broken lives and desolate hearts, a world in fear in pain, chose to call down from heaven forgiveness, not vengeance, and in this way opened a future marked not by judgment but by mercy, not by conspiracy theories but truth, not by despair but hope, not by fear but courage, not by violence but healing, not by scarcity but abundance, not by hate but love, and not by death but by new life.

That's what forgiveness can do. That's what forgiveness does. May God give to all of us a clear sense of the forgiveness in which we live. May God grant us the faith and courage to walk into the future that such forgiveness creates.

Hymn of the Day

From Emmanuel Lutheran Church in Vienna, Virginia, Robert Morehead is back with us this week to lead our hymn of the day. “Forgive Our Sins as We Forgive” (ELW #605) ties closely in theme to today's gospel. Robert provides background about this song and how it encourages us to forgive the things rooted in

weeds of unfairness and bitterness. This is especially important in today's world as so much of what we encounter and live in this time of pandemic and climate distress seems to be unfair and bitter.

Here is the link to Robert's message and sharing of this hymn: https://youtu.be/6ZjO_03wMGg.

(If you want to skip the background, use this link to jump straight to the hymn: https://youtu.be/6ZjO_03wMGg?t=133.)

MaryRuth72, another of our musical friends during this time, provides a prayerful version of today's hymn of the day. In her video, words the hymn are shared on screen as she plays piano accompaniment: <https://youtu.be/3GJrLpuZKkA>.

Prayers of Intercession

Drawn together in the compassion of God, we pray for the church, the world, and all those in need, responding to each petition with the words "receive our prayer."

God of open arms, make Christians into signs of your gracious welcome, to both members and newcomers, whether meeting physically or digitally. Strengthen faith through Bible studies and Sunday schools, confirmation classes and youth ministries, and nurture new ventures for education and growth. Bless bishops, pastors, and deacons for their work in this unprecedented time.

A brief silence.

O God, you are full of compassion; receive our prayer.

God of lands and seas, continue your care for your creation. Where human selfishness has brought ruin and destruction, we ask you to heal and renew your earth. Preserve the lands from fire and storm. Protect the sources of food that your creatures need for life.

A brief silence.

O God, you are full of compassion; receive our prayer.

God of justice, lead the nations away from the ways of violence. Guide the United Nations and other organizations that seek reconciliation across national borders. Show families, neighborhoods, and nations how to welcome diversity while sharing common ground. Preserve our election season from abuse and rancor.

A brief silence.

O God, you are full of compassion; receive our prayer.

God of our homeland, visit the American cities that are addressing local racism. Stand with both protesters and police, that civil society may be preserved and improved. Bring both healing and justice to our land.

A brief silence.

O God, you are full of compassion; receive our prayer.

God of the sufferers, visit prisons and care homes with health and hope. Free victims of human trafficking and forced labor. Deliver all who are bound by debt. Feed all who hunger and provide safety to migrants. Protect firefighters and first responders. Heal the sick, especially those we name here before you: Marge, Sue, Mary and her parents, Carolyn, Marsha, Martha, Pat, Valetta, Paul, Vallie, LaVaune, Kathy, Frank, Lisa, Rita, April, Bev, Bob, Beth, and Marlene.

A brief silence.

O God, you are full of compassion; receive our prayer.

God of goodness, once more we beg for a way through the pandemic. Comfort the afflicted. Support medical workers. Prepare a vaccine.

A brief silence.

O God, you are full of compassion; receive our prayer.

God of tender power, we live to you. Hear now, we pray, the desires of our hearts.

A longer period of silence.

O God, you are full of compassion; receive our prayer.

Whether we live or whether we die, we are yours. We thank you for those who have led us in the faith. Hold us with them in your everlasting love.

A brief silence.

O God, you are full of compassion; receive our prayer.

All these things and whatever else you see that we need, we entrust to your mercy; through Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

Offering Prayer

Let us pray.

Blessed are you, O God, maker of all things.
You have set before us gifts of your good creation.
Prepare us for your heavenly banquet,
nourish us with rich food and drink,
and send us forth to set tables in the midst of a suffering world,
through the bread of life, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.
Amen.

Song of Prayer

The four young men who form the singing group "King's Return" lead us this week in an amazing *a capella* rendition of a song of prayer that coincides strongly with today's gospel, "Ubi Caritas." A version of this ancient Latin song of mercy, love, and being joined together in God is present in our ELW hymnal as #642. King's Return sings today an arrangement by Norwegian composer and pianist Ola Gjeilo.

Here is the video link: <https://youtu.be/oCQOXY-FWTK>.

Latin Text:

*Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est.
Congregavit nos in unum Christi amor.
Exultemus, et in ipso iucundemur.
Timeamus, et amemus Deum vivum.
Et ex corde diligamus nos sincero.*

English Translation:

*Where charity and love are, God is there.
Christ's love has gathered us into one.
Let us rejoice and be pleased in Him.
Let us fear, and let us love the living God.
And may we love each other with a sincere heart.*

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial,
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours,
now and forever.
Amen.

Let Us Be Sent in Service

Sending Song

Naoko Okada is back with us again to lead our sending song, "O Christ, Our Hope" (ELW #604). This week, she is joined by a few fellow members of the choir at Lutheran Church of Our Savior in Tampa, Florida.

Here is the video link: <https://youtu.be/6mrd4Of76Xw>.

Song Lyrics:

- 1 *O Christ, our hope, our hearts' desire,
creation's mighty Lord,
redeemer of the fallen world,
by holy love outpoured,
by holy love outpoured:*

- 2 *How vast your mercy to accept
the burden of our sin,
and bow your head in cruel death
to make us clean within,
to make us clean within.*

- 3 *But now the bonds of death are burst,
the ransom has been paid;
you reign above at God's right hand,
in robes of light arrayed,
in robes of light arrayed.*

Benediction

Mothering God,
Father, † Son, and Holy Spirit,
bless you and lead you into the way of truth and life.
Amen.