



Christ Lutheran Church

605 South Fifth Street • Norfolk, NE 68701

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Pastor Chip Winter, Director of Ministries

"The Greatest!" – St. Matthew 18:21-35

3rd Sunday of Easter – April 30, 2017

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Grace to you and Peace, from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen. The text for our sermon is the Gospel appointed for the day and already read for us from St. Matthew, the 18th chapter.

My dear family in Christ, who is the greatest? Some of us remember a heavy-weight boxer who made that claim repeatedly: **"I am the greatest!"** One Muhammad Ali by name. He tried to make his case in the ring. Bill Gates tried with a computer. Nebraska will try once again on the gridiron, but I'm not sure we're quite there, yet. Some might see Dr. Martin Luther that way with a hammer and a church door. Greatness is often, although not always, measured in terms of strength – making it on your own, changing the world.

When you've dreamed about greatness, what did it look like? Was it in terms of winning the lottery? Was it acing an exam or getting a specific job? I remember in my school years thinking that if I could dunk a basketball, that would be great. Tennis ball was the best I could do.

At one time or another, we desire to be great, to stand out. We want to be the go-to person, the one who is admired by us because they know so much and can do "anything." Jesus' disciples were no different. Our text's chapter begins with the disciples asking Jesus: **"Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"** (18:1).

We know that Mother Zebedee wanted her sons to be the greatest. Simon Peter never seemed shy about taking that role for himself. It seemed that might have been what he was after when he asked Jesus how often he needed to forgive his brother. To show his greatness Peter goes beyond what Jesus had just said about seeking out an erring brother – bringing forgiveness first to him alone, then with one or two others, and finally pleading with him to receive forgiveness from the Church as a whole. No, Peter wants to show his greatness not with three, but with seven – seven chances for forgiveness.

That really is rather impressive. Imagine forgiving your spouse for cheating on you seven times. Forgive your father seven times for abusing you that many times. Even the little things – after which of the seven times your child spilled their milk would you begin to lose your temper? It's a tempting route to yell and fight, or stop talking and cut ties. Peter's question looks better all the time.

But it's as if our Lord hears Peter's prideful outburst, notes his desire for greatness, and says: No, Peter, not **“seven times, but seventy-seven times”** or as some translations put it **“seventy times seven.”**

Now it's not Jesus simply pushing back the cut-off line. It's not that Peter has the wrong number – not seven, but seventy-seven or 490. No, what Jesus says is that forgiveness has no end; it's inexhaustible.

St. Augustine noted that the genealogy from Jesus back to Adam (in Luke chapter 3) has seventy-seven generations. That is, forgiveness in Christ Jesus extends to every generations.

Or, take the connection between Cain and Lamech in the book of Genesis. As Cain was punished for killing his brother Abel, the Lord sealed him with a sign so that if anyone killed Cain, vengeance would be taken **“sevenfold”** (Genesis 4:15). Lamech then sang to his wives: **“I have**

killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain's revenge is sevenfold, then Lamech's is seventy-sevenfold (Genesis 4:23-24). The wording is the same! The forgiveness Jesus offers through His crucifixion and resurrection covers all – even Lamech's murderous revenge.

Then we move to the parable Jesus tells, teaching us what this forgiveness means. There is a master who settles accounts. He calls in one servant who owes him ten thousand talents, a talent being worth about twenty years' worth of wages. So on my salary and benefits it would be like owing \$32 billion; I'd have to work over 2,500 lifetimes to pay that off!

This servant is caught in an unpayable debt. In a last ditch effort he falls to his knees, imploring the master, **"Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything"** (26).

Like Jesus with Peter, or a mother with her child, you can imagine the Master smiling at this. It's almost cute to see the desire to fix or pay back or get it right when it's so obviously impossible. So **"out of pity,"** Jesus says, **"the master...released him and forgave him the debt"**(27), no strings attached.

It's unbelievable. You cannot run a business on your gut, feeling sorry for your servants. Where's the greatness when you run around canceling debt, looking soft? Let's imagine the servant was absolutely certain this was too good to be true. There's no such thing as a free lunch – the master is certain to call in the favor later on. He figures he's got to do something, that at best he's bought some time, delayed the punishment just a bit.

But he's scared. He has no joy in his forgiveness because he doesn't believe it. So, **"he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii [about one hundred days of work – you do the math: the weekends off, about a third of your annual income], and seizing him he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay me what you owe'"** (28).

Notice the violence, the anger, the urgency. When greatness is strength, it's at the expense of others. There is no pity, no compassion, even when the guy pleads with the very same words the first servant had used but moments before. Only this debt isn't impossible – not like the first debt was. Oh but this first, doubting servant needs to have something to prove he is great.

As the master hears how the first servant dealt with his fellow servant at the parable's close, we move from pity to wrath. The servant finally gets the master he imagined he had all along: the one who gives what's deserved, who measures greatness by strength, by force.

As Simon Peter hears this parable he is likely cut to the heart, as are we. Think of those whose forgiveness you have withheld or neglected to extend. How often have we lost our temper. Strong words when irritated with a neighbor. Effectively ending the relationship with a relative with whom you cannot agree. Swearing and becoming awful company over a simple game.

How great, in comparison, is the forgiveness we have in Christ Jesus! How great is His compassion, His love! How tremendous is His sacrifice, setting aside His power, His eternal glory, to suffer the punishment of our sins, the humiliation and the gore of the cross. There He wins the forgiveness of our sins – not for seven, but for seventy times seven and on to infinity. Your unkind words pierced His brow, your silence was echoed in His abandonment, your bad temper nailed His limbs to the cross and the blood He shed there has cleansed you from all unrighteousness. All has been forgiven by our Lord. How can we possibly hold back forgiveness for things done to us which are so small in comparison?

Recognizing this forgiveness from the cross and the open tomb does something to us. It changes us. The more we hear of the magnitude of our debt and the complete forgiveness, simply by Jesus' word, the more we're set free to forgive others. Our forgiveness of others depends on Jesus' forgiveness of us on the cross.

Who is the greatest? Why, Jesus is. Jesus is the greatest, Whose forgiveness of you is undeserved and complete. Today, you share in His greatness, with the opportunity to share His greatness, His forgiveness, with all. Amen