In the name of ✢ Jesus.

I'm sure you like I have heard someone say, "What he or she did is unforgivable." Having just passed the anniversary of 9/11, the lives taken, lives of survivors still affected, the ongoing consequences of that attack — we're still in Afghanistan fighting in our longest war! — one might say that that heinous attack was unforgivable! Some of you might agree.

Or as our country has been roiled in outrage and protest and riots for over three months following the tragic death of George Floyd, it appears that not only alleged acts of police brutality are unforgivable, but also our nation's founders, many of whom were slave owners, were irredeemably evil. Our memories of them must be erased, their monuments torn down, their names no longer spoken. Unforgivable!

Maybe as sinners we understand that sentiment and maybe agree with it. But imagine with me something even more personal. What if someone did some evil act to your spouse or your child? Violating her? Killing him? What if someone stole all your retirement income in a Madoff-style ponzi scheme? What if someone stole your identity and ran up huge debts? What if an employer kept secret from you your longtime exposure to a toxic chemical and now you have terminal cancer? You would surely find it hard to forgive such a person. You might even say, "that's unforgivable."

But when you do, you are not speaking as Christ does. You are not speaking Biblically. Thanks be to God, that's not how Jesus talks. It's not how He views forgiveness. Jesus says that *"every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people,"* except for one, and that one exception is the sin against the Holy Spirit. *"[T]he blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven,"* He says (Matt. 12:31). And without going into too much detail, that sin is to reject the Holy Spirit's verbal urging to believe; it's to remain faithless; it's to reject Jesus and the saving work He did to the end of their days.

So, I'm relatively sure that when a person says, "that's unforgivable," he's not talking about a lack of faith. Rather, someone has done something to him that he simply cannot find it in himself to forgive.

Truthfully, many of the things that people do to us are likely little slights and often unintended. We should be quick to speak words of forgiveness for those. But some sins are big ones. Think about Joseph of old. His brothers sold him into slavery and lied to their father about it. Joseph went through trials with Potiphar's wife and then was cast into prison in Egypt before finally he was elevated to second-in-command there. How easy it would have been for him to say to himself, "what they did was unforgivable" when Jacob's sons came to him for help. How easy it would have been for him to exact some retribution on his brothers — after all, they thought he was dead

and didn't recognize him; but Joseph did not. The brothers admitted what they did was evil. Joseph experienced that evil, and he knew they had meant to do him evil. And yet, Christ-like, he did not repay their evil with evil. He did not withhold forgiveness from them.

And as there's no sin too big to be forgiven, neither can one commit too many sins to be forgiven. That's the point of Peter's question. Now, he no doubt thought he was being plenty generous in forgiving as many as seven times, but Jesus said, "No! Not seven times; much more than that — seventy times plus seven or maybe even seventy-seven times. It doesn't matter. He means: no limits there either. Keep on forgiving. In His kingdom of grace here on earth, this is how Jesus rules: with a grace that is without limit. And so, as we proclaim forgiveness in the church, so are we Christians to keep on forgiving.

"I don't know," we think. God is being rather demanding of us, isn't He? Doesn't He know how hard it is to forgive? Of course, He does, and Jesus tells a parable to illustrate.

A king wanted to settle accounts with His servants. He called a servant in who owed the king 10,000 talents. Suffice it to say that this debt was far too large for this servant to pay back, even in many lifetimes. What would be just? Surely, the king would be just in selling the servant's property and putting him and his family in jail to recover some of the debt. Of course, that's not what happened.

The king represents God in this parable, and, as St. Paul said in our epistle, *"each of us will give an account of himself to God."* And when our account is tallied, we will all find that the debt we owe God for our sinfulness is too great for us to pay.

Amazingly, the servant didn't even realize the enormity of his debt. He fell on his knees and begged the king: "Be patient with me, and I'll pay it all back." How foolish! Not only could he not pay it back, but he would also accumulate more debt in his trying. Friends, this is how it is for us, too. Not only is our sin so great that we cannot pay it off, but also, since we daily sin much, we add daily to our debt! Clearly, begging for patience is no help. The aphorism is that "if you're digging a hole you can't get out of, stop digging." But it doesn't apply to sinners — sinners sin. We're always adding to the debt.

The king recognized the servant's plight and, instead of seeking justice, filled with compassion, He simply forgave the servant his debt and set him free. Of course, it wasn't without cost. That forgiveness cost the king dearly — 10,000 talents, an enormous amount. He took it on Himself.

Dear saints, we also know that it cost the heavenly Father dearly to cancel our debt and set us free. That cost is not measured in talents, gold or silver. Rather it's

Unforgiveness? Not for Christians — Matthew 18:21-35

Page 3   Proper 19A   Pastor Douglas Punke

measured in blood, the holy, precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish (1 Pet. 1:18-19). The cost was His innocent suffering and death. This is the way St. Paul put it: *"you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him"* (Col. 2:13-15).

All this was pure grace. There was no merit or worthiness in this servant. The king, solely by grace, forgave him the debt and sent him away. The same is true for us: you are saved solely by God's grace, completely apart from anything you do, as St. Paul says, *"if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace"* (Rom. 11:6). By grace, God in Christ has forgiven you and set you free.

Now, you might think that the forgiven servant would have been thankful enough to share his good fortune with others, but instead as soon as he left the king's presence, he went out and found a fellow servant, who owed him a pittance. Seizing him, he choked him and ordered him to pay back the 100 denarii that he owed. A hundred denarii may be a large sum for a servant, but that debt is tiny compared to what the first servant owed his king.

I will not downplay the sins we commit against each other. They are not insignificant either, but compared to the debt we owe God, they are small, and they are by no means unforgivable, especially when you remember how much we have been forgiven. Indeed, when we treat one another's debts this way, we are calling into question the greater debt God has forgiven us in Christ Jesus. We could even be said to be despising God's grace toward us, and that's dangerous territory, Jesus says: *"if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses"* (Matt. 6:15).

That does not mean that our forgiveness is bestowed eagerly or cheerfully — even the things we do right are often tainted with sin — just more debt that our God forgives. Nor does it mean that our forgiving initiates God's grace toward us. Not at all. The parable is clear. The king initiated. And far from answering the servant's plea for patience, the king, out of His own compassion, forgave the servant. This is God's will for us, His antecedent will. "He earnestly desires the salvation of everyone" (Pieper, I:454).

But God also has a consequent will: "the condemnation of all who reject Christ" (Pieper, I:454). That ungrateful, unforgiving, unbelieving servant reaped God's wrath for his rejection of God's grace; his debt was reinstated; he was cast into

prison until he could pay — that would be never! So, Jesus says, it will be for us if, living in unbelief, we *"do not forgive [our] brother from [our] heart."*

So then, is unforgiveness the unforgivable sin? Not at all, but it is a symptom of that sin, of a hardened heart and unbelief that condemns. But that's not what God wants for you. Rather, He wants you to trust the grace of God in Christ our Lord *"who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good"* (Ps. 103:3-5). He wants you to acknowledge Jesus as the Lord *"merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love,"* who does *"not always chide,"* or *"keep his anger forever,"* who *"does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities,"* who removes *"our transgressions from us" "as far as the east is from the west"* (Ps. 103:8-12). And He wants us, from a believing heart, to do likewise to others.

Therefore, humble us, O Lord. Make us truly grateful for your grace in Christ Jesus. And help us to bear the good fruit of forgiveness to those who sin against us.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.