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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
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Lectionary Year A: Matthew 18:21-35

In his landmark book, The Cost of Discipleship, the German pastor, theologian, and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote:

Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.

Then, Bonhoeffer wrote further:

Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will go and sell all that he has. It is the pearl of great price to buy which the merchant will sell all his goods. It is the kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake a man will pluck out his eye which causes him to stumble; it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him.

When we're confronted by a Gospel text like today's, in which Jesus calls us to forgive not seven times, but rather seventy-seven times, is he calling us to be agents of "cheap" grace instead of "costly" grace? Speaking personally, I'm rather torn between what might be considered proper preaching and proper practice. I doubt that many Christians willfully extend "cheap grace" to murderers, adulterers, and thieves, nor should any preacher advise them to do so. Thus, the Gospel invites us into an uncomfortable tension, a tension between unconditional grace which seeks nothing of our neighbor and conditional grace which seeks hearty repentance that promises the sort of turning around evidenced by selling of goods

or (God forbid?) the plucking out of an eye.

Our Gospel text, then, becomes even more baffling in light of Jesus' parable about the forgiveness of debts. Debt forgiveness is good, so we might conclude. If someone owes us money, we needn't necessarily run after the person to ensure that we get every last penny owed to us. This would make sense in light of the fact that money is only money; any Christian is more than aware of the fact that there are things worth much more than money. Is anyone ever satisfied, for example, when a settlement or a life insurance policy grants tens of thousands of dollars when grief over the death of a loved one prevails indefinitely? No! And if one is, one's attitude and motives will be forever questioned...

How many murders have been committed by people desiring only to "cash in" on presumed promised wealth to named beneficiaries? It's the stuff of countless made-for-TV movies.

But then, if being a beneficiary is not an issue, we're put in a much different position. With the nineteenth anniversary of 9/11 having just passed, we're reminded of the thousands of people who died in the Twin Towers and elsewhere, and surely none of the family members of those who perished were the sort of opportunists eager to "cash in" on their fate. In fact, they are exactly the persons who would be struck by today's Gospel text in an unthinkable manner. Are they supposed to forgive terrorists...forgive them not seven times but seventy-seven times?

I know a pastor in North Dakota whose own child died in the Twin Towers on 9/11, and I cannot imagine the struggle that continues in his soul to this day...

There may be, however, occasions in which forgiveness is expected of us, and when it isn't. Similarly, there may be occasions in which forgiveness is unconditional

and when it's conditional. Should we offer unconditional forgiveness to every murderer, adulterer, and thief who crosses our path, even without the faintest hint of repentance? I don't think so. But what if our pettiness and vengeance against our neighbor causes us to withhold forgiveness when, in fact, forgiveness is necessary? Now, we're getting into the spirit of the text, as it were. Here, the release from the bondage to sin has an equal -- if not greater -- effect on us as it does on the transgressor. We're forgiving not so much because that person needs the forgiveness but because we need to experience the reconciliation that will free us from the resentment that we hold toward that person.

Such principles guide, for example, constitutional prohibitions against cruel and unusual punishment. Any criminal can, indeed, seek forgiveness -- if not before a court, at least before a priest or pastor. And our correctional system is supposed to uphold their end of the bargain by not, for example, drawing and quartering the criminal or engaging in any other such grisly act. Similar prohibitions against torture of prisoners of war date at least back to the Geneva Convention; in fact, military personnel who show no mercy to their prisoners run the risk of becoming war criminals themselves.

From recent history, one of the most dramatic examples of Christ-like forgiveness occurred on December 27, 1983, when Pope John Paul II forgave the man who attempted to assassinate him. But the Pope's forgiveness did not guarantee his immediate release from prison; rather, it offered an example of forgiveness consistent with the Gospel message found in Matthew 18.

Such instances would indicate that forgiveness is not a sort of "get out of jail free" card as found in the game of Monopoly. Forgiveness is surely not that. Forgiveness is instead the unburdening of the person wronged as much as -- if not more so -- the unburdening of the wrongdoer. It frees the person wronged from the

pettiness and vengeance that can hold him or her captive for the remainder of his or her earthly existence.

That, to use Bonhoeffer's terminology, is not "cheap grace." It is, indeed, "costly grace." It is a grace that acknowledges the sacrifice of Christ who gives us the example from the cross, as he said to the criminal next to him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43). Grace, for sure, comes to all who have paid the price, whether through tiny debts or high crimes. And for all of us who have come before our Lord in repentance, we receive the grace granted by him who paid the ultimate price of giving his life for us.

And when you forgive, you don't "forget." You're not Pope John Paul erasing any memory of your attempted assassination or of the perpetrator. You're not a bereaved person erasing any memory of your loved one's death in the Twin Towers on 9/11. Rather, you're eliminating any barrier to reconciliation that would stand between either your neighbor or your Lord. Reconciliation is not erasure, for sure; it is, instead, a state of grace that allows us all to be at peace with each other in spite of what any of us has done or left undone. And the chief Reconciler -- Jesus Christ -- leaves us with both his sacrifice on the cross and his example of the godly life. That is not "cheap grace," for it demands something of us. It is, indeed, costly grace, that gives everything to us. And it calls us to be equal parts judicious and generous.

Amen.