

October 6, 2019 – Luke 17:1-10

This past week was the conclusion of a rather well-publicized trial. It involved a woman named Amber Guyger. Guyger was an officer with the Dallas Police Department who came home to her apartment after her shift one night. She discovered a man in her apartment as she entered. And so she pulled out her service pistol and by her own admission intended to shoot and kill him.

She did exactly that, killing a man named Botham Jean. It was only after she killed him, however, that she realized that this was not her apartment. She was on the wrong floor. And she had entered the home of an innocent, unarmed man and murdered him as he sat eating a bowl of ice cream.

The trial was, as you might guess, complex and emotional. But, in the end, the jury couldn't get past the simple fact that Guyger walked into the apartment intending to kill Botham Jean whether he posed a threat to her life or not. And so they convicted her of murder and sentenced her to 10 years in prison.

That alone was a big enough headline, but what really took people off-guard was what happened immediately after verdict and the sentencing. You see, the judge allowed Botham Jean's family to address Amber Guyger. And Botham's brother, Brandt Jean, took the opportunity.

Not to condemn Amber for killing his brother. Not spew hate and curses. No, he took the opportunity to say, "I forgive you." And with the judge's permission, gave her a hug in the middle of the courtroom.

The pictures and reactions have been all over the media. And what's really baffling to me is that it's become rather controversial. There are people truly upset that he forgave her. They are actually angry with Brandt Jean for showing grace to this woman. The idea of feeling anything but outrage and vengeance is absolutely foreign to them.

But it wasn't to Brandt Jean. It wasn't to Botham Jean. I hope it's not foreign to you either. Because, as Christians, forgiveness is one of the most fundamental parts of our faith. And we shouldn't ever look down on someone who puts that kind of forgiveness into practice.

Jesus says as much in our Gospel lesson today: *"If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him."*

And what I find really interesting about this verse is the hypothetical that Jesus poses. Because he doesn't say, "If your neighbor murders someone you love, forgive him." Or something like that. You would think that would be hardest thing we could possibly do. One giant act of forgiveness like Brandt Jean showed.

No, Jesus doesn't highlight those sorts of enormous acts of grace. That certainly existed even in that era. No, Jesus highlights a different sort of forgiveness. The little acts of forgiveness, that we have to do day after day after day. *"If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, 'I repent,' forgive him."*

I don't know about you, but if a friend sinned against me, seven times in a single day, I'd really start to wonder if I should be calling him my friend. If he hurt me that many times in a single short span, even if after every single time he came back to me and said, "I'm sorry," I'd really start to wonder whether he felt any remorse for what he did at all.

And yet, I'm to forgive him. Just forgive him. Not even any qualifiers on that. Not, "I'll forgive him if he does something for me." Not, "I'll forgive him this time, but not again." Not, "I'll forgive him, but I want to see an attempt to do better." Just... "I forgive you." Nothing more.

It runs contrary to every notion of our being. In a sense, it's just as hard as a single giant act of forgiveness like forgiving someone for killing your brother. Because it's those little ways that people sin against us over and over and over again that make us doubt that they've actually repented.

It's those little ways that we are wronged that turn us into Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, wanting to be like God, knowing Good and Evil. Judging good and evil. Judging whether this person has really repented or not.

We want to be like God, demanding a sacrifice for every sin committed. An eye for an eye. Blood for blood. Seeing those who have wronged us sitting in sackcloth and ashes as they weep and wail over their sin. True remorse as it appears in our own eyes. And anything less makes us angry and vengeful and unforgiving. And yet, despite wanting to be like God, that's not at all how God forgives.

Every week we gather together in this sanctuary and make confession of our sins. And I encourage you to approach that time with heartfelt repentance and a sincere consideration of how we can better live our lives to God's glory. We should be overwhelmed with the magnitude of God's forgiveness and be truly remorseful for all that we have done wrong.

But what we can't forget about are all the times between Sundays when we sin against God and still receive His forgiveness. The seven times. The seventy times. The seven thousand times we sin every single day. With little more than a passing twinge of guilt... or maybe not even that. And God still says, "I forgive you." No, if's, and's, or but's about it. No conditions. No condemnation. Just forgiveness.

And so, like the Lord's Prayer says, we are forgiven in the same way that we forgive. And we forgive in the same way that we are forgiven. The two are inseparable. Which I think is why the disciples responded to this message in the way that they did: "*Lord, increase our faith!*"

Because that's what it really all boils down to. We forgive others with the faith that God will be their judge, not us. Which is not easy at all. We desperately want to judge others. We desperately want to point out all the ways that they have hurt us. Hurt others. All the ways they deserve to be punished. But the moment that we do that is the moment that we become the sinners. That we become the ones in need of forgiveness.

That we are forced to ask for forgiveness in the faith that God will not judge us as we deserve. That's what Habakkuk was talking about in our Old Testament lesson. Habakkuk is surrounded by injustice and evil and a people who needed to be judged. And yet, he doesn't judge them. He steps back and proclaims, "But the righteous will live by faith." Faith to forgive. And faith to be forgiven.

Faith to leave it in God's hands. It's not easy. It's not supposed to be. But it also doesn't get easier by trying harder. By forcing yourself not to judge. Have you ever tried that? Tried not to think a particular thought? Don't think about a purple kangaroo. What image just popped into all of your minds? A purple kangaroo.

The same goes for judgment and forgiveness. We'll never stop judging and learn to forgive by focussing on the person we're judging. That will only make us judge them more. No, we learn to forgive by being forgiven.

By turning our eyes away from the sinful world around us and looking at ourselves in that mirror of God's Law. Seeing that we are just as dirty. Just as sinful. Just as in need of God's forgiveness. And then standing in the miracle of His grace as it rains down on us. Washing every sin away.

Pretty soon, you'll see that person you wanted to judge. And you'll realize they look just like you. A sinner in need of forgiveness. And, like Brandt Jean in that courtroom, you'll realize that you have the amazing opportunity to offer them the forgiveness that God has already given you. Amen.