

“Grace Dispensers”

“So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

One of my more interesting summer jobs was when I worked as a night watchman at the American Standard plant in Piscataway, NJ. Working the “graveyard shift” (12:00 midnight – 8:00 a.m.) had some advantages: there were no bosses watching over me; I could listen to my favorite rock station as loud as I wanted; and I never broke a sweat even on the hottest days. But there were also challenges associated with working through the night, the greatest of which was staying awake. I found the hour from 3:00 a.m. – 4:00 a.m. particularly daunting; if I could survive that part of my shift, then for some reason the rest of night went well. It was during this time that I discovered the wonders of caffeine as a pick-me-up; I can trace my coffee habit to this time when I really needed to stay awake. Unfortunately, the only coffee available in the “wee small hours of the morning” was from a vending machine, which dispensed some of the vilest coffee I’ve ever tasted. But despite its poor quality, the coffee that was dispensed from that machine served its purpose, so that I could stay awake during my shift so that the building survived the night until the day shift arrived in the morning.

A dispenser – such as a coffee vending machine – serves its purpose when it delivers the product that it contains. The building I was guarding contained a host of devices that were meant to dispense water through various faucets and plumbing that people rely on in their homes every day. As stylish as some of American Standard’s products have become, their main purpose remains the same: the manner in which they dispense water when needed. Indeed, any dispenser’s usefulness is judged by how well it delivers its intended product; even the most sophisticated dispenser is useless if it can’t fulfill the purpose for which it was created. If a dispenser fails to deliver, it has no reason for existing.

As we Lutherans observe the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation, we are called to reflect on our mission as a Church, and whether we are fulfilling the purpose for which we were created. In our Gospel lesson a few weeks ago, Jesus declared that Simon Peter was the *“rock [upon which] I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.”* (Matthew 16:18). The “church” (*ekklesia*) was the “assembly” of those who had accepted Jesus’ call to discipleship, those who accepted our Lord’s challenge to *“deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”* (16:24). This church that had been gathered by Jesus would be empowered by the Holy Spirit so that it might fulfill Christ’s commission to *“make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.”* (28:19-20). The purpose of the Church is summarized by our Risen Lord in his parting words to his apostles before his ascension: *“you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”* (Acts 1:8).

The purpose of the Church of Jesus Christ is to proclaim the Gospel, to be a “dispenser” of the live-giving and life-changing Word of God. At the heart of this Word that the church is called to dispense is the good news of grace, that we have been reconciled to God and received the forgiveness of sins through the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. The mission of the Church is to be the assembly of believers among whom this Gospel of grace is dispensed, where forgiveness and reconciliation are both proclaimed and lived. As God has proved God’s love for us in this gift of “amazing grace,” our call as God’s holy people is to dispense this gracious word of reconciliation in both word and deed.

- “God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of

God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.” – Romans 5:8-11.

- “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation” – 2 Corinthians 5:17-18.

It is this Gospel of grace, the good news that *“a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law”* (Romans 3:28), that Lutherans believe is the article of faith upon which the church stands or falls: *“Nothing in this article can be given up or compromised, even if heaven and earth and things temporal should be destroyed.”* (Martin Luther). But the fact that the Church’s mission and purpose is to dispense this grace doesn’t mean that the Church has always found it easy to live according to our Lord’s teaching on grace and forgiveness. Today’s Gospel lesson begins with Peter asking Jesus a question on the lengths to which one person in the church should forgive another: *“Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?”* (18:21). Peter’s proposal to forgive seven times may be seen as a reversal of the sevenfold pronouncement of vengeance in Genesis 4:15: *“Then the LORD said to [Cain], ‘Not so! Whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance.’”* Peter may have believed that his proposal would not only reverse such vengeance but would be a very generous gesture; after all, how many of us would be willing to forgive someone else seven times for the same offense? Peter *“wants to know just how much will be expected of him, how much is reasonable, how much is required. And so he suggests what by all accounts is a more-than-sufficient amount of forgiveness.”* (David Lose).

But Jesus’ response to Peter’s question is far beyond the disciple’s proposal: *“Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.”* (18:22). This number (which in some translation is “seventy times seven”) is not meant as a new limit on forgiveness, but is shorthand for an unlimited quantity (i.e. “the Nth degree”). Peter is trying to gain an understanding of the limits of forgiveness, while Jesus is teaching him and all of his disciples that the grace that they are called to dispense is to have no limits; for *“whoever counts has not forgiven at all, but is only biding his or her time. The kind of forgiveness called for is beyond all calculation.”* (M. Eugene Boring).

In order to illustrate the manner in which the Church is to dispense grace in the unlimited manner that Christ intends, Jesus teaches his disciples a parable in which *“the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.”* (18:23). The servant in this parable is not a household slave, but a subordinate official. The debt that he owed would have been incurred through mismanagement of the king’s resources and/or contracting to raise taxes from subject nations, not by personal expenditure. The amount that this servant owed is an extreme figure: “ten thousand talents” would have exceeded the taxes for all of Syria, Phoenicia, Judea, and Samaria. The amount is fantastic, beyond all calculation, and is one that would be impossible to repay; so the king *“ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made”* (18:25) – a purely punitive act, since there is no way that this would even make a dent in paying off this enormous debt. The servant’s situation is utterly hopeless; all he can do is beg for mercy: *“So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’”* (18:26). Surprisingly, *“and out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.”* (18:27). The unpayable debt is completely forgiven, with no conditions or strings attached.

We would expect that someone who had just experienced such a gracious gesture that liberated him from the burden of an unpayable debt would “pay it forward” in extending similar graciousness to others; but sadly, this is not what happens when the forgiven servant *“came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii”* (18:28). The debt of the fellow servant is microscopic compared to what the first servant had been forgiven; yet it is not an insignificant amount, representing 100 days’ wages for an ordinary laborer (*“After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into the vineyard.”* – 20:2). But for one who

had been forgiven in such an extravagant manner, forgiving another person of such a debt is what one would expect – but not what happens; for when the second servant falls on his knees and pleads that the first servant *“have patience with me, and I will pay you,”* the first servant refuses to forgive and *“threw him into prison until he would pay the debt.”* (18:29-30). The outrageous contrast between the way the first servant was treated by the king and the way the servant treated his fellow servant is not merely a matter of a contrast between the amounts each owed: *“in the first, there was no reasonable way to repay such a debt; one could only be condemned or receive mercy. In the second, while the debt is technically repayable, the servant does not respond to his fellow servant as he has been treated by the king.”* (Eugene Boring). This act of unforgiveness outrages the other servants: *“When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place.”* (18:31).

The king’s response is as we might expect: *“Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger the lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt.”* (18:32-34). Because the debt could not be repaid in several lifetimes, this is tantamount to a life sentence. The unforgiving servant learns the hard way that *“the only thing this forgiving king cannot forgive is the inability of others to forgive as they’ve been forgiven.”* (David Lose). Jesus concludes his parable with a warning to those who likewise fail to forgive others: *“So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”* (18:35), a restatement of Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount which immediately follows his gift of the Lord’s Prayer: *“For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”* (6:14-15).

- *“Our sins, which God forgives, are far greater than any sin against us we refuse to forgive. We cannot live from God’s mercy and forgiveness without extending that forgiveness to others.” – Lutheran Study Bible.*

As God’s limitless grace and forgiveness is at the heart of the Church’s faith, dispensing this same grace and forgiveness is at the heart of the Church’s mission and purpose. A church that seeks to set limits on forgiveness or fails to forgive as freely as we have been forgiven runs the risk of suffering the same fate as the unforgiving servant; we subject ourselves to the judgment of God if we fail to *“forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”* Being faithful dispensers of God’s gracious love begins when *“we regard no one from a human point of view”* (2 Corinthians 5:16) but through the “grace healed eyes” which now looks upon each person as Christ looks upon them:

- *“Brotherly forgiveness makes room for the forgiveness of Jesus to enter into their common life. Instead of seeing their neighbors as men who have injured them, they see them as men for whom Christ has won forgiveness on the cross. They meet on the basis of their common sanctification through the cross of Christ.” – Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*.*

The church whose very existence is rooted in the forgiveness of sins which is ours through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is called to *“see to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and through it many become undefiled.”* (Hebrews 12:15). Its core mission and purpose is to dispense the grace of God to all people; *“the church is, above all, a place to receive grace: it brings forgiven people together with the aim of equipping us to dispense grace to others.”* (Philip Yancey, *Vanishing Grace*).

As we observe the anniversary of the Lutheran Reformation, we are reminded that the Church of Jesus Christ is called to be *semper reformanda*, “always reforming” so that it might be faithful in every generation to God’s mission and purpose for God’s church. It means that we need to consider whether we have been faithful

disciples of Christ, and that we need to repent of our sinfulness that has included failing to be the grace dispensers that share the gospel of forgiveness as freely as we have received it. When we confess that *“we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves,”* we are confessing that far too often we have taken the place of the unforgiving servant who refuses to forgive others as we have been forgiven. As we believe *“that our sins are thereby forgiven before God in heaven,”* our grateful response to such forgiveness is that *“we truly want to forgive heartily and to do good gladly to those who sin against us.”* (*Small Catechism*).

- “God’s kingdom, the forgiveness of sins, has no limit, as the text of the Gospel so beautifully shows when Peter asked his question of the Lord. Jesus answered with the parable in which he earnestly exhorts us, in fear of the loss of God’s grace, to forgive our neighbor’s trespasses, without any reluctance, because God forgives us such endless sin and guilt. The debt that we owe God is a million dollars, which means that it is infinite. It is so great we could no pay it with all our possessions and with all our powers, for we cannot blot out even the smallest sin. And since God in his kingdom forgives us so much out of sheer grace, we ought also to forgive our neighbor’s little.” – Martin Luther, 1524.

Thankfully, I no longer drink terrible coffee out of a vending machine in the early hours of the morning; but I still have a machine on our kitchen counter that dispenses that wonderful beverage that makes every morning possible. The Lutheran Church is in many ways very different from the churches of our ancestors, but our mission and purpose remain the same: to be the dispensers of God’s grace to a world desperately in need of limitless message of forgiveness, life, and reconciliation. If we are to truly be the Church that bears the name of Christ, we need to be the Church that lives according to the will of Christ for the Church and the world: to place at the core of our life together the task of being *grace dispensers* who will in every aspect of our mission and ministry *“proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”* (1 Peter 2:9). Amen.