**14 Pentecost, Sept. 14, 2014, Ex 14:19-31; Ps 114; Rom 14:1-12;Matthew 18:23-35.Rev. Mary Trainor**

My family recently camped at Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming. Grizzly bears frequent the Park, and in fact while driving into the Park we saw a grizzly by the side of the road. There is an old true story about a ranger at Yellowstone who led some tourists to an area where they could safely observe the feeding activity of a grizzly bear. As people watched the bear eat, the ranger shared about how grizzly bears would often tear to shreds any animal that crossed their paths, especially while they were eating. Just then, a skunk wandered out of the woods towards the grizzly, and began to help himself to the bear's food. Everyone gasped, expecting the skunk to be devoured. Instead, the grizzly made no attempt to stop the skunk. The ranger explained, "**The grizzly learned long ago that it doesn't pay to mess with a skunk**." Wow - even a grizz can learn and change to do what is best! This story fits today's Gospel; certain things do not pay off for us either. It does not pay for us to **not** forgive one another. Just as the grizzly would have been damaged by the skunk if he or she had chased away the skunk, we are damaged if we chose not to forgive. Oh, it does not mean that we have not been hurt, and it does not mean that we give permission for others to hurt us....but we are to let it go, to forgive. We have all been wronged, we have all been hurt by others, and we all have been resentful.

In the Gospel, Peter asked Jesus if someone he knows does him wrong, ***“how often should I forgive? As many as seven times*?”** ***Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."*** Oh my, this means we are to forgive over and over and over again. Jesus forgives us over and over again and we are to do the same with each other. Rev. Lewis Smedes, forgiveness authority, says: "**We hurt, we hate, we heal. We hurt; that is, we feel the depth of an injury that has been dealt to us ~ we don't minimize it, or try to sweep it under the rug. We hate; that is, we blame the one who has hurt us ~we don't condone or excuse the offense. Finally, when we are ready, we heal; we let go of the pain that is binding us to the past, and move on. That is how we human beings forgive.**" This healing, letting go, is possible only with God.

Corrie ten Boom, a Christian whose whole family was killed in the Nazi concentration camps knows about forgiveness. She said, "**Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart**." Wilma, whose daughter Candance was murdered, knows something about forgiveness. She said, "**For me forgiving has been about turning what has happened to us into good. Forgiveness is not just a onetime event, nor does it mean you're doing the same thing again and again. The issues of Candace's murder present themselves differently every day. Forgiveness is a fresh, on-going, ever present position of the mind which takes on many different forms.**" This healing, letting go, is possible only with God.

Forgiveness is deciding to let go of the power that someone who has hurt us has over us. Forgiveness is not allowing ourselves to be abused or condoning the behavior of the one who hurt us. Forgiveness is not the same thing as forgetting. Forgiving someone does not mean that we stay in an abusive situation. In our culture, we can find many examples that help us justify our **not** forgiving certain people. We see reasons all around us to not to forgive....but we are to forgive anyway. That is Jesus' way: we have been forgiven, and therefore we are to forgive. It means letting go of the control that person has had upon us. This does not mean that the person who wronged us changes, or even apologizes -- this may or may not happen. Forgiveness is not giving permission to be mistreated.

Through forgiveness, we release the control the pain has had on us. Through the act of forgiveness, we are no longer giving this negative emotion the power it had in our lives. When we forgive, releasing the power our resentment had over us, we find freedom. When we give up our pain, bitterness, and hate we are free. Medical research has shown that the lack of forgiveness can make us sick. There is an old quote that says, "**Not forgiving is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die.**.” Hanging onto past hurts and resentments hurts our emotional and physical health. Jesus knows this. working through the unfinished business, letting go of the pain and moving on for *your sake.* You forgive so that you can finally get rid of the excess baggage that weighs you down and holds you back.

Paul, in our Romans reading this morning, talks about our accountability to God and the freedom that comes from living in Christ. We experience true freedom when we decide to live into the forgiveness we have been granted by God. We are reminded of this over and over again in our service: we begin with the **Gloria** singing: "**you take away the sin of the world**" and in the **Creed** we say "**we acknowledge one baptism for forgiveness of sins**." In the **Confession** we ask for forgiveness, and are granted it. In **the Lord's prayer,** we say: "**forgive us our trespasses AS we forgive those who trespass against us."** And, in t**he** **Eucharist** we hear Jesus say, “**This is my blood of the new covenant which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins.”** We forgive because we have been forgiven. It is simple and straightforward, and yet difficult. Forgiveness must become part of the way we live, we only hurt ourselves if we do not forgive. Our lives get stuck in that place of un-forgiveness, and it can make us sick. Is there someone you need to forgive in order to move on and live the new life in Christ? Or do you need to be forgiven for something you have done? Either way you have come to the right place. Receive the love of God in the forgiveness of your sins and then begin again. Amen.

Let us pray. Our God of forgiveness, thank you for forgiving us. Give us the strength to release the power the lack of forgiveness has over us, give us the words to forgive others. We know you will deal with the sins of others. May we find true freedom when we decide to "let go" of all the weight of hurt and resentment we have been carrying. Through Christ, the Forgiver we pray. Amen.