

2 (1975)

**THE SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY  
AFTER PENTECOST**

**Genesis 50: 15-21**

**Romans 14: 7-9**

**Matthew 18:21-35**

The 17th Sunday after Pentecost falls on September 14 in 1975, which is also the day of the Holy Cross, but it seems good to stick to the Pentecost lectionary anyway --- especially since the Old Testament reading and the Gospel are so rich in accents on forgiveness.

Accent 1: The Gospel for the day is a sequel to the passage dealing with brotherly admonition, a passage known popularly as "Matthew 18." That passage itself was the Gospel for the 16th Sunday after Pentecost. Matthew 18" is not a three-step handbook for expulsion — like one, two, three strikes you're out! It

merely gives a common sense, evangelical for instance" on how people within the community will care for one another. "Matthew 18" is to be highly recommended, but it is hardly unique: in fact, a similar disciplinary outline has appeared in the writings called the Dead Sea Scrolls. The chief accent in "Matthew 18" at any rate is on *gaining the brother or sister*.

Accent 2: The sequel to "Matthew 18" in today's Gospel is a passage which shows there should be no limit to attempts to gain and forgive the brother or sister. *Just* as Lamech wanted blood revenge 77 times, the Christian desires to forgive 70 times 7 times. That is, forgiveness resembles blood vengeance in that it sets no limits, holds back no energies to accomplish its goals. Luke 17:4 has a variant word of Jesus which says that if your brother sins against you seven times in one day — when will he ever learn? — you should forgive him seven times. The 70 times 7 figure seems to have come from the Septuagint's rendering of Genesis 4. But the numbers are perfect, round. Forgiveness means more than running through the three steps of "Mathew 18," the 7 daily sins of the brother, or the 490 offenses. In this "game" you're not called out with the 491st strike either — not when it's a brother or sister!

Accent 3: The parable in the Gospel announces judgment on those who fail to forgive from the heart. Jesus offers a "ridiculous contrast" in order to make himself perfectly clear. One person has a debt of 75 pounds of precious metal canceled, but demands foreclosure for a few pennies. The king had taken the big write-off with equanimity, forgiveness; he was hard nosed when he heard about the hard heartedness of the merciless servant. When God's rule is being exercised, the church will be ready to forgive the erring brother but will call down God's harsh judgment against those who jeopardize the community by themselves withholding forgiveness. Isn't that what Romans 16:17 is finally all about? Mark those who cause divisions and offenses, who delight in splitting the community. Avoid such non-forgivers! *Forgiveness from the heart* can have two emphases: On the one hand, it denotes sincerity and genuineness while, at the

same time, it speaks of that voluntary and willing spirit of forgiveness that is to flow from our heart, as it flows from the heart of God.

Accent 4: "Do not fear," Joseph says in the Old Testament lesson, "I am not God — therefore, I will forgive." Joseph was moved to tears as his brothers, those ruthless siblings, sought him out. God used their vicious rivalry to save many people's lives. That's ironic, but it's also ironic that the brothers came and fell down before him exactly as the dreams in chapter 37 had predicted. But these literary ironies are trumped by a theological one: Joseph said, "I'm not God; therefore, I can forgive." The Lord Jesus, however, as God, is the *friend of sinners*. We can thank God that Joseph didn't feel called upon to role-play God the judge, *and* we can thank God that our Lord Jesus role-played God, the big forgiver.

**Ralph W. Klein**