

Seventy times seven

In the gospel lesson from last week, Jesus taught about reconciliation, especially in our relationships within the church community. He gave some wise and practical advice on how to deal with our relationships when conflicts and difficulties arise. It seems that Peter wanted some clarification on this, so he asked Jesus, “If another member of the church that sins against me, how many times should I forgive them? As many as seven times?”

The Jewish tradition of the day held that if someone hurts or offends you, and asks for forgiveness, you ought to forgive them not just once, but twice, or even three times. So, Peter was actually being generous. In a way he was saying, “If someone sins against me, let’s take the norm for forgiveness, which is to forgive them three times. Well, I’ll double that, and I’ll even throw in one more for good measure. That’s seven times. Besides, seven is a good, Biblical number – signifying completeness. Should I forgive seven times, Jesus? What do you think?”

This sounds pretty good. Many of us would consider that a high standard. Imagine that a person you know offends you, it could even be someone in church, someone in your neighborhood, or family, even someone standing in the pulpit right now – imagine that this person has hurt you or offended you. And you forgive them. Then, they go and do it again. Now being a good Christian, you forgive them again. Then they offend you once more. By now, your tolerance might be wearing a bit thin. Once, of course. Two times, I am being generous. But as the saying goes, three strikes, buddy, and you’re out. So, when Peter asks, if someone sins against me, should I forgive them *seven* times, that’s a big stretch.

Then Jesus delivers the message, “Well, Pete, let me tell you how it is. It’s not a matter of forgiving someone two or three times. Or even seven. That’s just a start. You need to forgive in the range of seventy-seven times, or as some Bible translations put it, seventy times seven. Did you hear that? Seventy times seven. Do the math – that turns out to be four hundred and ninety! If you read the gospels carefully, you will find that Jesus doesn’t often answer questions directly, but this time he does, and wow, is it an answer. How many times do I need to forgive? Not two, or seven. But seventy-seven, or perhaps four hundred and ninety.

Then, Jesus gives a parable on forgiveness to really make his point. There was once a king who had a servant, or slave, with a very large debt: ten thousand talents. We need

to appreciate that 1 talent was an enormous sum. Some Biblical scholars believe a single talent was worth 10 to 20 years' worth of wages for the average worker. So, let's take the average and say 15. This person owed then thousand talents, which is roughly 150,000 years wages for a laborer, give or take a few thousand years. The amount is more than you and I will ever make in all our lifetimes put together. A huge amount that could never be paid. The servant and his entire family are in danger of going to prison for the debt. So, the man fell to his knees and begged the king. "Please have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." Of course, the request is ridiculous; no one could pay this much back. So instead of patience or justice, the servant receives much more; he receives mercy. The king forgives him his debt and sets him free.

But as this slave is going out, he comes upon a fellow servant. A regular person like himself. And this person happens to owe the first servant some money: a hundred denarii. A denarius was the usual day's wage for a laborer, putting it at around three months' worth of wages. This is a substantial amount, especially for a day laborer in those days. No average worker would have three months worth of wages tucked away in the bank. But one hundred denarii is minuscule compared with those ten thousand talents. Anyway, the first person, walking out of the meeting where he received mercy and freedom, sees this other guy with a debt, and here is what he does. He seizes him by the throat, and says, "Pay me what you owe." This fellow servant does a familiar thing: he drops to his knees and begs for patience. And the first servant refuses and throws the other guy into prison.

When word reaches the king, he is furious and summons the servant. "You wicked slave!" he says, "You should have showed mercy the way that mercy was given to you," he says. And the king hands him over to be tortured until his debt could be paid.

This is a rather dramatic parable: the enormous debt, the threat of prison, one person being offered freedom, another is grabbed by the throat, and then prison and torture. Forgiveness is serious business, it seems. I read one Biblical scholar who claims that by his estimation at least half of Jesus' teachings are either directly or indirectly related to forgiveness. Jesus used a very compelling story here to get our attention.

The parable has a few clear lessons. First, there is the sum of ten thousand talents, an amount signifying just how much we owe God if we could ever add it all up. You want to pay back God for all that we have been given? Well, how do you feel about working 150,000 years? We can never return to God what we have received. The parable reinforces that. But the parable also teaches that in the eyes of God, that simply doesn't

matter. “Be patient with me God,” we plea to God. And God replies, “I don’t really keep score. It’s not really about 10,000 talents, or 490 acts of forgiveness. It’s not about counting. It is about mercy and forgiveness and freedom. No questions asked. Go, be on your way.”

This is the good news of God’s forgiveness. Yet the parable also illustrates the hard lesson that we can choose *not* to forgive. We all know that familiar but demanding line from the Lord’s Prayer: forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Forgive as we forgive. Now, this doesn’t mean God will only forgive us on the condition that we forgive. God doesn’t give on the condition of anything. God gives unconditionally; that’s what grace is. What this phrase means is that the two are connected. As we know and experience forgiveness, and we are then more able to forgive. We know and receive love, then we have a heart to give love to others.

I like to think of it as being a wind instrument, such as a flute or a horn. The wind or breath given to us is the breath, the grace, the forgiveness of God. And God has already breathed that into us. We have already received this breath, this forgiveness; that is what our baptism tells us. God is already breathing that into us. Now we can choose to let this move through us, to be the kind of instrument we were created to be, and to create the music God desires for us, as we offer this to others. Or we can choose to shut down, close ourselves off, and not give this gift to anyone else. But when that happens, of course, we don’t leave room for the divine breath to move through us. The grace and breath of God is hindered. I think that is why we pray that line from the Lord’s Prayer.

When we choose not to become instruments of God’s grace, we become like the servant at the end of the parable. And we do so at our own choosing. When we choose not to forgive, when we choose to hold onto the old offenses and wounds and injustices that life and people inflict on us, when we say “I want to stay mad or get even” we are the ones who suffer. We really are. When we choose to turn away from forgiveness, we are tortured, we are eaten up inside. In this parable, the slave who refused to forgive others is imprisoned. This unwillingness to forgive became itself a prison. If we don’t forgive, we are still being held captive.

So, what is forgiveness? Forgiveness is not a denial of the hurt and suffering we have gone through. Forgiveness is not ignoring the injustices and wrongs that need to be named and addressed. Forgiveness does not mean tolerating cruelty or abuse. Forgiveness is not simply avoidance – it not ignoring the necessary steps in changing how we relate to someone who continually hurts us. And forgiveness is not a magical

once-and-for-all act where we say, 'I forgive you' and suddenly it's all finished and everything's fine.

Forgiveness is real work. It may have to take a long period of time. Jesus knew what he was talking about with this seventy times seven thing. It's understandable if it takes a long time because forgiveness is a process – a process of transformation we are invited into by God. Forgiveness is offering all of ourselves to God: the hurt, the anger, the confusion, the desire to get even, and the heartbreak. It is praying, "God, I want to be forgiving to this person, or to this situation." Or if that is too much, it is to honestly pray, "God, please give me the grace to *want* to forgive, because I am not there yet." It is a choice, a way we set our heart. And it is okay if we may have to do this over and over again. Maybe even 490 times.

Forgiveness is not just something we do; it is something that God does in us and through us. Forgiveness comes through a power that is bigger than you and me, more merciful than you, more loving than us. It is about our willingness to forgive. It is like the flute, where we become an instrument, a conduit of God's transforming love. Dutch concentration camp survivor, and author Corrie Ten Boom wrote, "To forgive is to set a prisoner free, and to discover that this prisoner was you." Forgiveness redeems us; it changes us. It redeems us. It is a way that God flows through us and brings new life.

Today we read from Psalm 103: Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all God's benefits. God forgives all your sins and heals all your infirmities. God redeems your life from the grave, and crowns you with mercy and loving-kindness. Bless the Lord, O my soul. We are forgiven. Grace has set us free. Amen.

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Proper 19A – 16th Sunday after Pentecost

Genesis 50:15-21 • Psalm 103 • Romans 14:1-12 • Matthew 18:21-35

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