

SECOND READING: Matthew 18:21-35

Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if my brother or sister sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" ²² Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven^{la} times.

²³ "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴ When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him, ²⁵ and, as he could not pay, the lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions and payment to be made. ²⁶ So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him by the throat he said, 'Pay what you owe.' ²⁹ Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' ³⁰ But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. ³¹ 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. ³² Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' ³⁴ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. ³⁵ So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

FIRST READING: Romans 14: 10-12

¹⁰ Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.^{la} ¹¹ For it is written,

"As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me,
and every tongue shall give praise to^{la} God."

¹² So then, each one of us will be held accountable.

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

“Forgiveness”

I saw a cartoon this week posted by one of my minister colleagues. In it, Jesus is speaking to his disciples after Peter has asked him how many times we must forgive. He is saying, *“Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy times seven times,”* and one of the disciples reacts, with head in hand, saying, *“Great, now I not only have to forgive my brother, but I have to do math!”* Pretty funny. Yes. Jesus’ answer, 77 or some texts translate 70 x 7, told Peter that we need forgive an enormous amount, way more than what can be counted and kept track of. Peter had done his homework and knew that there was a rabbinic tradition that said that a person should forgive as many as 4 times, so he had offered a seemingly extravagant guess of 7.¹ But Jesus said that greatly more than what seems possible, “as far as the east is from the west,” that’s how much we should forgive.”

And that is not easy news for us, is it? For forgiveness is hard. Forgiveness is hard. Being forgiven...now, that’s ok. The psalmist said, *“The Lord is full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and of great kindness.”* We are happy to hear this because we know we mess up and we need God to forgive us, but when someone does US wrong, when someone does US dirty, we say, “not so fast.” WE are not so full of compassion and mercy. We are not so slow to anger and of great kindness, are we? In a way, the disciple’s reaction in the cartoon was actually pretty spot on for us, right?,,no, not about hating math, but about being resistant to what Jesus was saying about forgiving .

Forgiveness is hard. And Jesus knew this. He told a story of a slave who owed a king a great deal of money, an absurdly large amount of money, a ridiculously large amount of money...a talent, you see, was equivalent to about 15 years labor, and the slave owed the king 10,000 talents...so, well, it was more than that slave could ever pay back, but yet the king forgave him the debt. *“It is almost amusing,”* Rev. Tom Long says, *“because the king responded to a ridiculous request with an even more preposterous response.”*² There were no threats from the king, no recrimination, nothing---just extravagant forgiveness of the slave, pure

¹Joseph Pagano. “Forgiveness” <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/forgiveness-pentecost-16-a-september-17-2023/>. (accessed 9-15-23).

² Tom Long. *Matthew* (Louisville: WJKP; 1997), 211-2.

and free.³ But when the same slave encountered another slave who owed HIM money, a very small amount, 100 denarii, he refused him forgiveness, grabbed him by the throat and demanded repayment. When the king heard about this, he became angry, reversed his decision to forgive, and put the first slave in debtor's prison, which given the amount that he owed, meant forever.

You know, I think one of the reasons that forgiveness is so hard is that it is difficult for us to admit that we need to BE forgiven, to concede that there is anything about us that needs forgiving. We really do not want to face our sinfulness, the fact we have arrogances and jealousies and selfish desires which can manifest themselves in offending others. As Bishop Will Willimon says, "*We, Christians, like to THINK we can get away with the fiction that we are, down deep, rather nice people.*"⁴ We also like to think that our character strengths are accomplishments of our righteous selves. And we can easily slide into a smug attitude that decides who deserves forgiveness and who does not, and maybe even the extent and limits of forgiveness they deserve.⁵ We forget that God seeks a relationship with whole human beings, every thought, word, and deed, everything, absolutely everything, that we are and do. And none of us have a righteous leg to stand on in comparison to Christ.

Another reason, I think that forgiveness is hard, is because it is very difficult to turn loose pain when we're the victim. The hurt often runs very deep, very deep. It can cut to our core. It can occupy our every thought. It's hard to forgive when the pain becomes the new center of our identities: the new definition of who we are---shaping us as the wronged, the hurt person.⁶ We find ourselves licking our wounds and festering over deep grievances long past, continuing to scratch the itch, holding onto that rope and ringing the bell, maybe just as the sound begins to dissipate. And to top it off, non-forgiveness as a behavior, revenge and retaliation, in our culture, often gets rewarded. It's seen as THE reasonable, rational thing to do, even respected.

Yet, Jesus asks us to forgive. He asks us to forgive and to keep on forgiving, forever and always. 70x7 times. He wants us to forgive so regularly that it becomes a kind of muscle

³ Brian Blount. "*Extravagant Forgiveness*" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uSInywsWcyI>. (accessed 9-9-20).

⁴ Will Willimon. "*Sermon: "Happy Lent."*" <http://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/8657/february-14-2018-appy-lent>. (access 2-25-20).

⁵ Joseph Pagano.

⁶ Fred Craddock. Quoted in John Buchanan. *The Hardest Thing of All*" <https://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2007/032507.html>. (accessed 9-9-20)

memory.⁷ He wants it to become our habit, not only for the benefit of the other person, but for ourselves. Recent scientific studies verify that forgiveness is good for us. People who forgive have lower levels of anger, anxiety, and depression, are more agreeable and emotionally stable, and may also have other health benefits such as lower blood pressure and resting heart rates.⁸ But Jesus' point, I think, is something else.

I believe, Jesus know that forgiveness is good for us because it positions us rightly. Forgiveness puts us in a position of perspective to realize that we are ones who have been given extravagant, limitless forgiveness from our God, every day we live, every morning we rise, every evening we lie down by virtue of God's grace alone. Breathing free and forgiven, we can see that we are all utterly dependent on the unconditional, unmerited grace and mercy of Christ, who has removed our sins as far as the east is from the west, and awwho sks us to do, equips us to do the same with others.

How important this message is for us Christians now in a country, in a world ,where political, racial, religious and gender relationships are so strained, where reason and objective truth have been replaced by enmity and violence. How important it is that we show the world this perspective of rejecting the "tit for tat", and the "what about them" -isms and instead forgive and love each other as we have been forgiven and loved. As Tom Long says, "*We are the ones with an enormity of sinful debt sailing in a little boat afloat on a deep sea of grace.*"

Rev. John Buchanan writes of a woman who had suffered the most devastating loss imaginable: the murder of her daughter and her sister, her sister's unborn child, and her sister's husband. The young man who did the crime was in jail and will be for the rest of his life. The woman wrote in an article on the death penalty, which she opposed, saying "Does healing require forgiveness?" "As a Christian, it does for me," she said, "but let me be clear: I forgive the killer not because he had an excuse; he had none whatsoever. I forgive not because he asked for it; he hasn't. I don't forgive for him. I forgive only for the One who asked and

⁷ Brian Blount.

⁸ Joseph Pagano.

taught me to---for God; for the author and protector of my faith, for the one who forgives and loves me, Jesus Christ.”⁹

Yes, Jesus asked us to forgive and keep forgiving forever, even though it’s hard, because you see...Jesus knew that soon, very soon, he would lift a cup and after giving thanks he would say *“THIS is the cup of the new covenant in my blood, poured out for many for the forgiveness of sin.”* He would lift that cup as a promise that even when we fall short, when we don’t forgive, our God is still there forgiving, loving, helping us, giving us yet another chance. “He knew that soon, very soon, he would be nailed to the cross to slowly die, each breath harder and harder to take, bleeding from his side and his hands and feet. He would look down to see his followers, the ones he called friends scatter from the scene as others deride him, mock him and cast lots for his clothes. He would not then say, *“You will get yours one day.”* ‘Oh, you’ll all be sorry.’” No, he would simply say what he knows, *‘Father, forgive them.’*”¹⁰

Let it be so. Amen.

⁹ John Buchanan. *“The Hardest Thing of All”* <https://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2007/032507.html>. (accessed 9-9-20)

¹⁰ Fred Craddock. Quoted in John Buchanan. *“The Hardest Thing of All”* <https://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2007/032507.html>. (accessed 9-9-20). I thank John Buchanan who continues to teach me the art of homiletics by his great example.