

“How Many Times?”
Rev. Eric S. Corbin
First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
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Matthew 18:21-35

²¹Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” ²²Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. ²³“For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; ²⁵and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. ²⁶So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ ²⁷And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸But 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.’ ²⁹Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ ³⁰But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. ³¹When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. ³²Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ ³⁴And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. ³⁵So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

In our passage today, our friend Peter wants some clarification on forgiveness. He asks if he should forgive another as many as seven times. Now Peter thinks he's being magnanimous. A common understanding of the day was that one should forgive another person three times. Peter more than doubles that to the highly-symbolic number seven. I picture him there, expecting a gold star from Jesus, a big pat on the back. Instead Jesus says, "No, Peter – not seven times, but seventy-seven times." And the Greek is not clear here, it may be seventy-seven times or it may be seventy times seven. Either way, it's a big number and the number is not even the point. Jesus isn't really giving Peter, and us, a literal number. He's not saying to forgive someone 70 times and then stop on the 71st, or 490 times and stop on the 491st. He's saying "forgive, and forgive, and keep forgiving!" There are no limits on God's forgiveness of us, and so there shouldn't be any on our forgiveness of others.

Jesus then tries to explain this to Peter a bit better with a parable. In the parable, there is a person who owes the master 10,000 talents. Now, 1 talent equals 6000 denarii, so 10,000 talents equals 60 million denarii. And a denarius was the daily wage for an unskilled laborer. So the servant owes his master the equivalent of 60 million days' work. Assuming the standard 6-day workweek of the time, this man must work for 192,307 years to pay off his debt! Jesus is intentionally being dramatic. This again is not a literal number. This is an amount that is *impossible* for the man to repay, ever. It just can't happen. And so, the man begs for patience, saying he'll pay it back eventually – though both knew that was impossible. The master does the surprising thing, and forgives him.

And then the man goes along his way until he sees someone who owes him 100 denari. 100 days' work – that's about four months work – not tiny, but nothing compared to the over 192,000 years' work that he had owed his master. He refuses to forgive his fellow servant this comparatively miniscule amount. He had just had an impossible debt forgiven, and yet he refuses to forgive a small debt.

And Jesus tells us that we have all been forgiven so much by God, and yet we refuse to forgive our brothers and sisters. God has forgiven us debts that are impossible to repay, and our thanks is to refuse forgiveness of others.

Several years ago, I was holding onto a hurt. This hurt was caused by an old friend who I by that point was no longer in contact with, and who had no idea that I was holding on to my anger. I

mentioned this in a sermon I preached on this parable and a member of that church came up to me afterwards, looked me straight in the eye and said, "Forgive your friend." Somehow that pierced through the wall that I had erected around that hurt and I began that day to forgive my friend. Little by little, I realized that I was no longer carrying around that baggage.

As I mentioned, my old friend never knew that I was holding on to my anger, and he never knew when I forgave him. *Neither* state affected him. It only affected me. As Anne Lamott wrote, "not forgiving is like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die."

We forgive because we have been forgiven, and then the result is that it sets *us* free. We must forgive others because we have experienced the grace and love of our God in forgiving us, and we are to share that grace and love with others. God has erased the insurmountable debt that we owe to God and so, in joyful gratitude, we should show that forgiveness to others.

But we also find that in forgiveness, we give up the resentment that we have been holding on to. We open our tightly closed fist to be able to receive grace again and again. This does not change the fact that we were wronged. If the offense was a true offense, then we recognize that we have the *right* to be angry. We simply choose to *release* that anger – to give up that anger as a gift to someone who may be completely undeserving of that gift, and may be completely unaware of the gift. We choose to release them from a debt that they could never repay, just as God did for us.

When we forgive, we do not pretend that the harm did not take place, or that it was not serious. We do not pretend that we were not hurt. We do not condone or excuse the behavior. We still take it seriously, but we refuse to *hold on* to anger. We refuse to let it have power over us.

Now, forgiveness is not the same thing as reconciliation. Forgiveness can come without reconciliation, without restoring the relationship. There may be legitimate trust or safety issues that prevent such reconciliation or make it unwise. But intentional forgiveness means we do not respond in revenge, but will instead act in forgiving ways.

I'm recording this sermon on September 11th. Just those two words evokes so much in us. Today, it has been 19 years since the unimaginable acts that occurred in this country. It is one of those days that live on in our memories forever, a date which lives in infamy, as the saying now goes. One of the emotions evoked in us is anger, and many of us wonder how we could ever

forgive those responsible. Call it coincidence or call it God's providence that the lectionary – a lectionary set up nearly 40 years ago – has appointed for this Sunday's Gospel reading this lesson on forgiveness.

Rev. Will Willimon says that he saw a couple being interviewed in New York the day after September 11th. Their beloved daughter had perished in the towers, and their grief was quite palpable. The reporter, stammering, said to them, "Well, I know that you will be able to go to your place of worship this weekend and there maybe you'll find some consolation in your faith...." And the grieving mother replied, "No, we won't be going to our place of worship this weekend 'cause we're Christians, and we know what Jesus commands about forgiveness, and frankly, we're just not yet ready for that. It'll be some time before we'll want to be with Jesus."¹

I quote that, not to condemn them and not for us to point fingers at them. No, it is easy to see where they are coming from. Forgiveness is *not* something that comes easily, particularly in such a devastating circumstance as the one they had just experienced. Forgiveness is not to be taken lightly. But while we can understand what that mother was saying, the answer is not to turn away from Jesus; it is rather to turn toward Jesus, to beg of him the strength to forgive when it seems impossible, when we would rather hold on to our anger.

Presbyterian minister and author Frederick Buechner writes: "Of the Seven Deadly Sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back--in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you."²

Corrie ten Boom knows the challenge of forgiveness. She, along with the rest of her family, was arrested for hiding Jews in their home during the Holocaust. Just a few years later, she encountered a former guard at the concentration camp where she had suffered and her sister had died. She writes:

It was in a church in Munich that I saw him, a balding heavy-set man in a gray overcoat, a brown felt hat clutched between his hands. People were filing out of the basement room

¹ http://day1.org/950-how_you_will_know_if_its_jesus

² *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, by Frederick Buechner

where I had just spoken. It was 1947 and I had come from Holland to defeated Germany with the message that God forgives. ...

And that's when I saw him, working his way forward against the others. ...

My sister Betsie and I had been arrested for concealing Jews in our home during the Nazi occupation of Holland; this man had been a guard at Ravensbruck concentration camp where we were sent. ...

"You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk," he was saying. "I was a guard in there." No, he did not remember me.

"But since that time," he went on, "I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well.

Fraulein, ..." his hand came out, ... "will you forgive me?"

And I stood there — I whose sins had every day to be forgiven — and could not. Betsie had died in that place — could he erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking?

It could not have been many seconds that he stood there, hand held out, but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do.

For I had to do it — I knew that. The message that God forgives has a prior condition: that we forgive those who have injured us. "If you do not forgive men their trespasses," Jesus says, "neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses." ...

And still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion — I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. "Jesus, help me!" I prayed silently. "I can lift my hand, I can do that much. You supply the feeling."

And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes.

"I forgive you, brother!" I cried. "With all my heart!"

For a long moment we grasped each other's hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God's love so intensely as I did then.³

God's love is shown to us in God's mercy. God has forgiven each of us much more than 7 times, much more than seventy-seven times, or even seventy times seven times. And we are called to forgive each other as God has forgiven us.

Most of the wrongs that we must forgive others are not on the scale of 9/11, or other national tragedies, or the Holocaust. Most of the time, we are dealing with issues on a much smaller scale. All the moreso, then, we must forgive. We must forgive, never excusing wrongs or pretending they didn't happen, but treating others with a spirit of love and compassion. We have been forgiven so much by our God, and we are called to forgive much in return. Impossible? Yes, it is, if we rely only on our own power. But we can begin to do so through the power of the grace and love of our God, who lives in and through us. Scriptures tell us that "with God, all things are possible."

So let us let go of our resentment and anger and instead hold onto the promises of our God, who says, "Behold, I am making all things new." And we are assured that God will walk with us all of our days, teaching us and leading us to the forgiveness that is possible only through God's grace. Amen

³ <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/questionofgod/voices/boom.html>