

Pentecost 15
Year A

Matthew 18:21-35

Peter came and said to Jesus, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times....”

Prayer:

Heavenly Father, in uncertain times, like today, we plan for the expected, and try to predict the unexpected. We often forget that we can turn to you.

Forgive us, Lord, our lack of faith. Help us, also, to forgive others.
-AMEN

Sermon:

Life is hard. Especially these days.

We've all suffered scrapes and bruises.

Physical. Psychological. Emotional.

Politicians rant and rave.

Taxes are up. Services down.

Wherever we go, someone or something steps on our toe.

Today's Gospel about forgiveness is right on target.

We *are* Christ followers. Because we *are* forgiven,

Christ calls us to *practice* forgiveness.

These are hard days. We have all lost something.

Some of us reveal our wounds. Others hide them.

But we all have wounds.

Politicians want us to find someone to blame.

Anybody but them!

Forgiveness isn't easy.

If it were, Peter wouldn't have asked Jesus about forgiveness.

Sometimes it's not easy to forgive.
Sometimes it's really hard to let go.
Sometimes forgiveness seems impossible. ⁱ

So, Jesus taught us to pray: "forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us."

But I have to confess.
Sometimes, I have trouble letting go.
Sometimes, I am too quick to judge, and too slow to forgive.

I hope that God forgives me more quickly than I forgive others.ⁱⁱ

"Forgive me, Lord, my trespasses ...
even when I take WAY too long to forgive others".ⁱⁱⁱ

Peter knew that people blow it. We all know that!
Peter had blown it plenty of times.

Rabbinic tradition in Jesus' time,
required a person to forgive *four times*. ^{iv}

St. Peter was blustery guy. Outspoken. Loud. Earnest.

He was hedging his bets^v.
Instead of asking Jesus, "is 4 times enough?"^{vi}
he asked "...should I forgive somebody ...7 times?"

Why 7 times?

The number 7 was an important number back then. It still is.
Lucky 7. It's some combination of infinity and perfection.

There were 7 Wonders in the Ancient World.^{vii}

Medieval Students learned about the 7 “liberal” arts:
grammar, rhetoric, logic, music...
arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy.

Math students learn that 7 is a prime number.

Each week has 7 days. So does each phase of the Moon.^{viii}

A Jewish menorah has 7 candles.

There were 7 days of Creation.^{ix}

There are seven deadly sins.^x

If you break a mirror, you’ll have 7 years of bad luck.

The number 7 may or may not mean much to God.

But the number 7 certainly meant a lot to Peter.

It was a big deal when Peter asked Jesus:

“Should I forgive a person 7 times?”^{xi}

And it was a huge big deal when Jesus replied:

“No. Not seven times. Seventy-seven times.”

Infinity.

Jesus preached forgiveness of sin.

The Hebrew word for “sin” is something like

Shooting an arrow and missing the target.

Maybe you miss a lot. Maybe you miss a little.

But you still miss.

But... it’s fixable.

We begin to fix our mistake when we ask for “forgiveness”.

We say: “I’m sorry”.

*Forgiveness is good for the person who forgives.
And it is for the person who is forgiven.*

Social scientists know that people who practice forgiveness
are happier than those who don't.

People who forgive are less anxious.
Less angry. Less depressed. Less unstable.

People who forgive are healthier. They tend to live longer.^{xii}

*But Jesus didn't say:
"Practice forgiveness, because it's good for you".*

*Jesus wants us to practice forgiveness,
because forgiveness is good for the other guy.^{xiii}*

Forgiveness isn't about us. Forgiveness is about the other guy.

In his parable, Jesus says the unforgiving servant
owed the king 10,000 "Talents".
A Talent was a lot of money back then.

2,000 years ago your average taxpayer worked 7 days a week^{xiv}.
If she did that for 5 years, she would be paid about one Talent!
In her whole life she might earn 5 or 6 talents.

10,000 Talents was like a *gazillion dollars*.^{xv}

Why did the King forgive the entire debt?
We have no idea.
But that much money could never be repaid.^{xvi}

Why did the guy who was forgiven a gazillion,
hunt down the guy who owed him a couple of bucks?^{xvii}
We don't know

Jesus' *parable is about forgiveness.*

Forgiveness is good. And not forgiving, *isn't.*^{xviii}

We are in debt to God.^{xix}

God has given us the sweet gift of life.

God has given us the sweet flower aroma of Spring.

God has given us the Rockies, and pure flowing water?

God has given us the star filled night sky.

We owe our King more than we can ever pay.

We owe Him, more than we can imagine.

Like the King's servant in Jesus' story,
if we simply ask – we can be forgiven.

We are forgiven.

We must pay that forgiveness forward.

Forgive us our trespasses,

as we forgive those who trespass against us.

-AMEN

ⁱ Everyone can remember being really upset about something, when your spouse or your best friend think it's not much at all. And they tell you so! Now that can be hard to forgive! Sometimes what is unbearable to one person is like nothing to another. It's always been that way.

ⁱⁱ Sound familiar? I won't ask for a show of hands!

iii and even, then, often only half forgive some of those who trespass against me.

iv Modern day Jewish believers might suggest that forgiveness is complicated; forgiveness can exist even if the error has consequences. That is, a “lack of consequences is not synonymous with forgiveness and negative consequences does not equate with lack of forgiveness, as in forgiving one’s child for demonstrating carelessness or inconsideration while still holding her accountable.” <https://theconversation.com/exploring-the-complexities-of-forgiveness-71774>

v Peter was asking Jesus, indirectly, about his own sins and whether he might be forgiven!

vi 4 times is actually a lot of forgiveness. Think about it!

vii 1. Egyptian Pyramid at Giza, 2. Hanging Gardens of Babylon, 3. Statue of Zeus at Olympia, 4. Colossus of Rhodes, 4. Statue of the sun god Helios, 5. Temple of Artemis at Ephesus, 6. Mausoleum at Halicarnass, 7. Lighthouse at Alexandria. <https://mysticalnumbers.com/number-7-in-ancient-times/>

viii (more or less).

ix Gen. 1:1-2:3.

x Is one of them unforgiveness?

xi That is a lot of forgiveness. Think about it.

xii See, Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman, [Character Strengths and Virtues](#).

xiii ... and it’s good for the world. It just happens to also be good for us! Whether we are the *forgiver* or the *forgiven*!

xiv Only the Jews had a Sabbath!

xv Or, speaking as a recovering attorney, about 10 billable hours!

xvi Today a lawyer might have suggested Chapter 13 bankruptcy. But Jesus went to the cross to pay a price we could never pay!

xvii Jesus’s parables often used extreme scenarios. Like a poke in the eye. Hard to overlook.

xviii That seems obvious to us today, but it may not have been so obvious, 2,000 years ago.

xix Even sitting aside the whole debt of the cross idea, and Jesu dying for our sins.