

Matthew 18:21-35

Common English Bible

Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Should I forgive as many as seven times?”

Jesus said, “Not just seven times, but rather as many as seventy-seven times. Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle accounts, they brought to him a servant who owed him ten thousand bags of gold. Because the servant didn’t have enough to pay it back, the master ordered that he should be sold, along with his wife and children and everything he had, and that the proceeds should be used as payment. But the servant fell down, kneeled before him, and said, ‘Please, be patient with me, and I’ll pay you back.’ The master had compassion on that servant, released him, and forgave the loan.

“When that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him one hundred coins. He grabbed him around the throat and said, ‘Pay me back what you owe me.’

“Then his fellow servant fell down and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I’ll pay you back.’ But he refused. Instead, he threw him into prison until he paid back his debt.

“When his fellow servants saw what happened, they were deeply offended. They came and told their master all that happened. His master called the first servant and said, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you appealed to me. Shouldn’t you also have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?’ His master was furious and handed him over to the guard responsible for punishing prisoners, until he had paid the whole debt.

“My heavenly Father will also do the same to you if you don’t forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

Do you know those people who say whatever they are thinking? Maybe you are one of those people who say whatever they are thinking. I believe that Peter in our scripture may be the patron saint of people who say whatever they are thinking. Peter has heard the instructions on how followers of Jesus are to deal with conflict, and now he wants a number. He wants to draw a line in the sand as to exactly how forgiving he needs to be.

Peter knows Jesus, so he knows Jesus will set the number high, probably ridiculously high, so Peter shoots even higher. When can I write this person off? After I forgive them once? What about seven times?

We are here at the beginning of a new school year and I have already had to ask forgiveness from all of the people who live in my house. I’m just going to say that the learning curve is steep for online school and that 7th grade math is hard.

When I do premarital counseling with a couple I have them take an apology language quiz. If you want to take it, google apology language quiz. There are five apology languages: Expressing Regret where you want to hear the words, “I am sorry.” Accepting Responsibility where you want to hear the other person say, “I was wrong.” Making Restitution where you want the other person to make amends. You want to hear them ask, “What can I do to make it right?” Genuinely Repenting where you want the other person to verbalize their desire to change by saying, “I’ll try not to do that again.” Requesting Forgiveness where you want the other person to ask for forgiveness. You want to hear them ask, “Will you please forgive me?”

Peter’s proposal to forgive seven times sounds extravagantly generous, especially because there is no mention of the offending party asking for forgiveness. How many times should I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? That’s it. This is just about us and how many times we should forgive. It doesn’t matter if the other person says, “I am wrong” or “I am sorry” or “Will you please forgive me?” Jesus tells Peter not seven times but seventy-seven times. The Greek number that is used can be understood as seventy-seven times or seventy times seven times which is 490 times.

It isn’t about the math, it is about the nature of forgiveness. If you have to count how many times you have forgiven someone, you haven’t forgiven at all. The kind of forgiveness

called for is beyond all calculation. Jesus tells a story about an unforgiving servant and tells us that we have to forgive from our heart.

Being in Christian community isn't about retaliation or revenge or vengeance, Christian community is about forgiveness. The call to forgiveness should be a daily mantra and we need a daily reminder for forgiveness. Forgiveness is letting go of a wrong or a sin that has been committed against you. It isn't forgetting or ignoring or keeping track of debts. Forgiveness isn't about counting.

Peter's question takes forgiveness out of the countable category and moves it into the incalculable category. That doesn't seem fair. We are doing a sermons series called No Fair! It is a play on words a little bit because there isn't a State Fair this year. It isn't fair that there is no fair! There is a lot in our world right now that isn't fair, but the math of forgiveness doesn't make sense. Forgiveness isn't fair because some people deserve to be forgiven and some people don't.

It is so easy for us to keep tabs on how people have hurt us. Our reality is a tit for tat reality. You hurt me this way, well, I'll show you and I'll hurt you in this way. I remember when my kids were small and in the stage where they pulled other people's hair. There was actually a parenting book that I read that said when your child pulled hair, to pull their hair back so they would know how much it hurt. I can remember my daughter pulling my hair and I pulled hers back and she cried. I wondered if that was the best way to handle this, but I did it anyway.

Sometimes it seems like it is easier to forgive for the major grievances that we have against someone, but we daily hold on to grudges that we have against people. Forgiveness is about the big stuff but it is a part of daily life. Forgiveness is about the small stuff too. Forgiveness isn't about keeping score. It isn't about what I have done right and what someone else has done wrong. Forgiveness isn't about torturing someone, you know ignoring someone or not talking to them until forgiveness happens. Forgiveness from our heart is difficult, hard work. It isn't fair.

Forgiveness is saying the relationship is more important than holding onto the grievance. It doesn't mean that the relationship will look the same, it will be different. Forgiveness is a process, it isn't a weekend project. It is sometimes a daily, every second breathing in love for the other person. Forgiveness isn't about a number. You don't quit forgiving at 77 times, it is ongoing. We have to practice forgiveness in our relationships with our loved ones, with our family, with parents and children and siblings. Forgiveness is leaving the past in the past because the past doesn't control the future. A different future is now possible.¹

I love that in church we confess our sins to one another. "Merciful God, we confess that we have not loved you with our whole heart. We have failed to be an obedient church. We have not done your will, we have broken your law, we have rebelled against your love, we have not loved our neighbors, and we have not heard the cry of the needy. Forgive us, we pray. Free us for joyful obedience, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen." Then, when we hear the good news we hear these words, "Hear the good news: Christ died for us while we were yet sinners; that proves God's love toward us. In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven!" My favorite part comes next, when all of you say, "In the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven! Glory to God. Amen." You forgive me, and it makes me cry every single time. It is a commitment to ongoing forgiveness.

I love that after we share in the Confession together we are supposed to Pass the Peace. Writer Brene Brown says being a part of a church community should be about singing, breaking

¹ Thanks to the Working Preacher podcast for much of this. https://www.workingpreacher.org/brainwave.aspx?podcast_id=1292

bread, and passing the peace with people you want to punch in the face.² Brene Brown says people are hard to hate close up and that we need to hold hands with strangers.³

Being people of forgiveness means we are not waiting until someone earns our forgiveness. That is as impossible as our trying to earn the love of God. We want to forgive as God forgives.

The problem with counting how many times we forgive is that we're not really practicing grace; we're just extending our patience.⁴ When we keep count of wrongs we aren't washing away the past, we are just relegating it to the archives of our hearts because we remember all of the times that we have been hurt, all of the harmful things that have been said. When we choose to forgive, we have to be ready intentionally to stop rehearsing and rehashing that moment of pain. To forgive is to live freely in the present and be hopeful about the future. To not forgive is to be dragged down and kept captive by the past. Forgiveness is life.

We choose forgiveness and let old wounds go. When we choose forgiveness, we take the risk of being hurt again because we have no guarantee this will not happen again. We have to risk that, just as God has taken that risk with us.

Jesus isn't asking us to be doormats. There are consequences to actions. It is not okay to stay in a relationship when someone belittles you or abuses you. There is accountability for actions. When you dismiss anger and name calling and violence, life gets sucked out of you. Forgiveness is about keeping the future open and offers a path forward. I remember talking with someone who felt so guilty about getting out of an abusive relationship and I told them, "Leaving was the only way that you are going to live. You count too much and God loves you too much."

In his *Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves*, Desmond Tutu says, "Forgiveness is truly the grace by which we enable another person to get up, and get up with dignity, to begin anew. To not forgive leads to bitterness and hatred. Like self-hatred and self-contempt, hatred of others gnaws away at our vitals. Whether hatred is projected out or stuffed in, it is always corrosive to the human spirit."

Forgiveness is hard. It is hard to let go of grievances when those grievances have become part of our identity, when they have become part of the story we tell ourselves about ourselves. It is hard to let go of the habit of keeping track, of counting, of always assessing to make sure we're getting what we think we deserve, but we need to do it for our own good health.

Forgiveness starts with remembering and internalizing that you have been forgiven by God. And you will be forgiven by God of all things that you have done and not done. You are forgiven. And so am I. Thanks be to God. Now it is our turn to forgive, Amen.

² <http://jenhatmaker.com/episode-02-brene-brown.htm>

³ <http://www.globoforce.com/gfblog/2017/true-belonging-brene-brown-braving-wilderness/>

⁴ A Preacher's Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series. P. 61.