

**September 17, 2017 – Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time  
“The Blessing of Forgiveness”**

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**Matthew 18:21-35**

If you were asked the question, “How often must I forgive someone who hurt me?” What would be your answer? Peter thought nailed it – answering his own question – 7 times? Sounds like a lot to me – and Peter must have thought it more than generous. After all, 7 is a perfect number – the implication being that to forgive that often would be to forgive “perfectly” or “completely.”

Then Jesus responds with the next to impossible – “Not 7, Peter, but 70 times 7.” Now, don’t get all hung up on the math. The implication is that forgiveness must be beyond perfect. In fact, forgiveness must be a ridiculous amount in order for it to meet God’s expectations. But more than that, forgiveness is systemic – meaning whether it is offered or withheld, has an effect on the entire community. But I’m getting ahead of myself. Let’s just stick with – “You gotta forgive a lot,” in order, to meet God’s expectations. That’s hard enough – don’t you think?

What is interesting regarding this question posed by Peter is not only Jesus’ response, but the equally ridiculous parable he uses to illustrate further his point.

You’ve heard the story, so I won’t retell the entire parable once again, but just like the ridiculous number of times Jesus challenges us to forgive, pay close attention to the gross exaggeration evident in the story – a teaching technique often found parables and done in order to drive home a rather simple point.

The first servant owed the King a **huge** amount of money – an amount that is not based in reality. The point being the King forgave him of an enormous debt – cancelled the whole thing. But then the servant does not follow suit. When he is confronted with someone who owes him an equally ridiculously **small** amount – while he cannot afford to pay up – he throws him in prison until, such time as, he can make good on his debt.

The punchline is equally disturbing – something about that’s how God deals with us. Implying that God’s mercy is limited based on our own ability or desire to forgive. We could fixate on that, but to do so also misses the point.

The context of this story and the setting are so important for fuller understanding. Matthew was writing to a newly forming community. As is the case in most new groups they were likely experiencing the “storming” phase of formation. It’s that time after the honeymoon. You know, when those cute little things you just loved about the other early on in the relationship turn out to be the most annoying and grating qualities that nearly drive you nuts. That’s where this new community was. They needed to engage in a lot of forgiveness if this whole experiment was ever going to work AND if they were going to be able to offer a whole new take on Jewish faith.

We should also recall that this story follows another instructional moment in Jesus teaching where he guided the community on how to confront those who had gotten out of line. I'll leave you to read the preceding verses in Matthew to get a better sense of the broader context.

What is MOST important here is this rather contagious effect of forgiveness. In fact, forgiveness is supposed to engender forgiveness. So that the extent to which I forgive will have an enormous bearing on how that same generosity – we might call it mercy – is passed along. It's an ethos that is implied in the prayer we offer, at least, each week when we say, "Forgive us our debts – as we forgive our debtors." And all of this forgiving has a systemic effect on the broader community. IF we are a forgiving community – we will automatically be a more loving community, a more authentic community, and a safer community for all participants. It is, indeed, the "blessing of forgiveness."

All of which brings us to the critical reality that we need to sense we are forgiven before we can ever offer forgiveness ourselves which, I believe, is really what Peter was seeking – and that which he would have to revisit shortly after Jesus was arrested and he denied he ever knew him.

Self-forgiveness or receiving forgiveness is an incredibly difficult thing for most of us. In many ways, it's actually easier to hold onto our guilt. Doing so affords us a certain amount of control and offers us a good reason for our self-loathing and dare I say – self-pity. To let go of that opens us to a level of vulnerability and authenticity – a state absolutely necessary for sincere intimacy – and that scares the "bejesus" out of most of us. Let me give you a personal example.

When I came out as a gay man nearly 20 years ago I experienced a tremendous amount of guilt. I was desperately torn between two intensely strong desires – the desire to be true to myself, to be authentic, to be real AND the desire to be loyal to the woman I loved, to remain committed to our marriage vows, and to keep our family intact. To deny myself was to lie, to be a hypocrite in my preaching as I proclaimed God's love for others, but could not believe it for myself. But to embrace who I was seemed somehow so selfish. How could I do this to my wife? How would the children respond?

I held on for a long time, but doing so comes at a high cost. In fact, it's almost always self-destructive. It took me a long time to realize that my attempt to hide (even from God) – as if I could really do that – was my attempt to control the whole thing. By not being honest with myself, I was trying to shield God from loving fully who I was. Only by confessing all of this could I step into my true self and open my life completely to God's loving embrace.

The whole experience was a struggle and incredibly painful. To embrace my truth meant hurting my wife deeply, an action for which I eventually had to ask and receive her forgiveness.

While I did that – and here is my point – it was years before I could really accept the gift she gave me. Instead of receiving the grace of her forgiveness, it felt better to absolve

my guilt by holding on. In essence, I became the arbiter – both judge and jury of my own punishment. Feeling bad and beating up on myself for what I had done somehow seemed to balance my guilt. To accept her forgiveness, meant I had to let go of all that and receive that which I could not achieve or earn on my own. By holding on to my guilt and feeling bad, it seemed like I was somehow paying for my sin which is a foolish waste of energy. I might go so far as to say to deny grace is another means of sinning because it stands in the way of my passing along the same blessing to others.

Are you beginning to see the systemic effect of all this? We HAVE to let go in order that we might receive the grace that is offered to us in forgiveness in order to heal and to move toward wholeness.

And so this is why I insist on offering a prayer of honesty – an opportunity for personal and corporate confession – each week at the beginning of our worship service. It's not done to wield guilt or make folks feel bad about who they are or what they've done. On the contrary. It's a time for us to be honest with ourselves – to get real – to offer it all to God – to let go of that which stands between myself and God and to receive the unmerited grace of forgiveness – the “Blessing of Forgiveness” that God wants so desperately to give us so that we may, in turn, do the same.

So to get back to Peter's original question, it's not so much about how many times we forgive – rather it's all about the intention of our heart – our longing to be honest – our desire to let go and let God heal our guilt and brokenness – a reality that can only happen if we are willing to give up control.

Those of you in the 12-step community have this down pat and you have much to teach the rest of us. For you already know and have experienced, that ultimately it's about surrender. Realizing our powerlessness. Our need for rescue. Our realization that we cannot do this on our own. That our Higher Power – the Holy One – indeed God herself wants nothing more than for us to realize we are loved, forgiven, free. We may have to make amends for wrongs done, but forgiveness is available to us. Given that we might realize its blessing and offer the same blessing to others.

And so I invite you now – once again – to pause, close your eyes, and bring to your mind that which you feel the need for forgiveness. Ask yourself the question, “Do I need to do something to affect that possibility?” If so, perhaps you might make yourself a promise to do so. Or is there someone that you need to forgive? Someone who has hurt you? Can you let that go? In short, are you willing to let go of your control in order to experience the blessing of forgiveness?

Let us continue to ponder that during this period of silence.