

Forgiving Over and Over Again
16 Pentecost; September 13, 2026
Saint John's Episcopal Church

Exodus 14:19-31; Exodus 15:1b-11, 20-21; Romans 14:1-12; Matt 18:21-35

That is a great set of readings! I'll focus on the Gospel, but I invite you to spend time with the others also this week.

In the Gospel, Peter asks Jesus an excellent question: how often do I have to forgive someone who sins against me?

Peter should have stopped there. But that is not Peter's way, so Peter also proposed an answer to his own question. "As many as seven times?"

Given what comes next, we can see that Peter is not taking seriously enough the Christian responsibility to forgive.

But I have feel for Peter. People can be irritating. We're not given the backstory for Peter's question, but my guess is, one of the other disciples has been repeatedly irritating Peter. And, depending on the provocation, letting it go seven times could be a lot.

Whatever was going on with Peter and the gang, as we make Peter's question our own, as we reflect on our responsibility to forgive people who have sinned against us, we need to begin by acknowledging that forgiving people even one time can be really hard.

That's why I am guessing Jesus' answer horrified Peter, and it should horrify us. Jesus tells us we have to forgive "not seven times, but seventy-seven times."

That does NOT mean we should keep careful count of the sins against us. "That's seventy-five times I have forgiven you. That's seventy-six. That's seventy-seven, and we are done! No more forgiveness for you!"

No, what Jesus means is that we should forgive others, and that we should keep on forgiving others pretty much indefinitely.

Bummer!

Now, before I go any farther, it's important to add a qualification. Jesus is NOT telling us that we have to let people abuse us over and over again. That's clear from the context.

Immediately before our passage, Jesus gives instructions to his disciples about what to do when another member of the Church sins against you (Matt 18:15-17). It is as if Jesus was anticipating Peter's question.

In that earlier passage, Jesus tells the disciples, first confront the other person privately. Then, if the person remains stubborn, take a witness or two with you. If that doesn't work, report the situation to the entire Church. If the person still refuses to make amends, cast the person out.

Like everything Jesus says, that passage requires careful interpretation. But for our purposes this morning, it's enough to remember that Jesus acknowledges that we may sometimes have to confront people who have done us wrong. What Jesus adds in our passage is that we should confront the other person in love and that we should always be prepared to forgive.

Even still, being always prepared to forgive is hard. Jesus knows that Peter, Jesus knows that we, may need a little convincing.

There are, it seems to me, three basic reasons Jesus might have advanced for why we should forgive. One is personal. One is relational. And one is theological.

The personal reason to forgive is that resentment can be a heavy burden. Forgiving someone who has harmed us is a way of putting that burden down. It frees us from the weight of our own anger and hostility. My guess is, we can all remember feeling relief as we forgave someone. Certainly I can.

The issue Peter seems concerned about in his question about forgiveness is relational. Peter is thinking about how people in the Church can get along with each other.

I'm new enough here that I don't know any examples from Saint John's of one person sinning against another, and the damage that can do to a parish. It wouldn't be appropriate to share a story like that from the pulpit anyway.

But on this, too, I suspect most of us can reflect on our own experience of long-term relationships of one sort or another.

Where I have most experienced the need to forgive and be forgiven is in my marriage. Carrie has had to forgive me a LOT more than seventy-seven times. As you will come to know, Carrie is a better person than I am. But I've had to forgive her plenty of times, too. The fact is, in any healthy long-term relationship, there will be a lot of forgiving going both ways. For us to remain a healthy parish, we need to remember that.

But the reason Jesus gives for forgiving is theological. And, as is so common with Jesus, it takes the form of a parable.

A king is calling in his debts. A man owed the king 10,000 talents. Out of curiosity, I looked up how much that is. Ten thousand talents was worth 60,000,000 denarii. It would take an ordinary worker about 200,000 years to earn that kind of money, or roughly the entire time span that modern homo sapiens has existed.

Of course, the man with a debt that size couldn't pay. He begged for more time. The king did better than that. In an astonishing act of generosity, the king forgave the man the entire debt.

As the fortunate man left the king, he met another man who owed him 100 denarii. That's one six-hundred-thousandth of the debt this man has just been forgiven. But he responds to his own debtor harshly, which didn't end well for him.

We can plug ourselves into this parable. The king is God. We are the man with the enormous debt. God forgives us all that debt. The question is, how will we treat the people who owe us a much smaller amount? Can we forgive them as we have been forgiven?

Simple enough. Except that Jesus' parables are never simple. So, we need to sit with it.

Some people feel their own sinfulness keenly. Others, who may sin just as much, think of themselves as pretty good.

I'm in the second category. I know that I sin. But I think of myself as a nice guy. I haven't committed any of the really big sins, and I am not normally super-obnoxious. (I can say that because Carrie isn't here!) I don't naturally identify with the man who owes the king 60 million denarii.

And that is the hook in our parable. Jesus is telling people like me that we are that man, and that our debt is that large.

It turns out that the Christian standard of behavior is considerably higher than being nice most of the time. The Christian standard of behavior is perfect love: perfect love of God and perfect love of our neighbors.

In my evening prayers, as I review my day, I'm not supposed to ask myself, "was I mostly nice?" The right question is, "did I love perfectly?" By that measure, I'm in deep debt every single day!

Facing that magnitude of failure each day can be a little depressing. But that's where the good news of our parable comes in. We are not perfect in love. But God forgives our failures to love.

And, hopefully, as people who have been forgiven over and over again, we get a little better at loving, with time and with practice.

And one of the best tests of our ability to love is how we respond to people who have sinned against us. We, who have been forgiven much, can hopefully forgive others as we have been forgiven.

Here is an invitation. Take time this week to think about a person who has sinned against you, and pray for that person. If that's hard, and it probably will be, ask God for help. Because Christ is all about forgiveness. And we who follow Christ are called to be all about forgiveness too.

In Christ's name. Amen.