

Matthew 18:21-35 (NRSV)

Then 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?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

"For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, 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. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But 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.' Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

Today marks an anniversary of sorts. As many of you know, we work on a three-year lectionary, a three-year set of readings. After three years, the readings repeat. As it turns out today begins

my second trip through the lectionary at Saint Nicholas. This text was the basis for my first sermon here.

I always worried about this happening. Would I have anything new to say about the text after I had preached on it once already? Anna Kitzmiller, our administrator, told me that if you didn't have anything new to say about the text, you probably should worry about your Christ-centeredness and your spiritual growth because you should always be changing and growing and seeing new things in Scripture. Hmm. No pressure.

So, I looked back on what I said about this text the first time, and it wasn't bad. I said that forgiveness was the most powerful force in the universe, because instead of breaking things apart, forgiveness was able to put things back together. I mentioned my relatives – I come from a German family – who'd had a dispute over some dinner plates, I think, a dispute that had gone on for decades. I said that these relatives needed to push those stupid plates away in order to be free of them – that that's what forgiveness is, putting something aside so that we can return to relationship with each other.

What would I say differently today, three years later? Well, first, in three very busy years so much has happened for me, for us, in this wonderful extended family called Saint Nicholas. When I preached on this text three years ago, I barely knew any of you. Now, well, it was so wonderful last Sunday to have everyone back from the summer, to see all of you again and realize how much I'd missed those of you who'd been on vacations or at the beach or whatever. You see, one thing that I didn't exactly understand about being a pastor a few years back is how much you come to depend on the relationships you make, how precious each of you has become to me.

I realized, too, that in the three years that have passed, forgiveness in the community is not really so abstract an issue

anymore. I have said and done things for which I have sought forgiveness and people have sought forgiveness from me for things they have said and done. Not awful, terrible things, just things that can disturb relationships, can upset others unnecessarily or that expose assumptions and expectations that aren't valid or helpful. Stupid jokes, thoughtless comments, taking things and people for granted.

And I see now that forgiveness, asking for it and granting it, forgiveness is an absolutely necessary social and spiritual lubricant, a kind of currency, if you will, for the people of God. With forgiveness, something that threatens a relationship can be marked, identified and let go. Disturbances that are not marked and not identified sometimes can't be let go of and so they stay on, they hang around, like ghosts or evil spirits.

Isn't it interesting that Peter asks Jesus, "if another member of the church sins against me?" Actually, nothing in the original Greek says anything about the church – Peter actually asks, "if a brother sins against me." The fact that the NRSV translates this as "another church member" may say a little more about how often church members fight with each other, or it may say that we can't imagine applying this lesson to the world at large, since it barely works for the church.

After all, Peter is thinking he's doing a good thing – forgiving as many as seven times. Imagine that the chairperson calls a meeting of a committee or a task force you are on. And when you get to the meeting, no one is there, and you call the chairperson and he says, "Oh my goodness, I forgot. I'm really sorry." And you say, OK, never mind, not a problem. So on another day, the chairperson calls another meeting, so you race home from work, throw together a quick dinner and get to the meeting just on time and sure enough, again, no one is there. And you call up the chairperson and he says, "Oh my, I forgot again. I'm really sorry."

Now, be honest. This is only the second time. Would you be willing to forgive him five more times? That's what Peter said. How about *seventy-five* more times? That's what Jesus said. In fact, some translations say he said seventy times seven, *488 more times*. Does it seem likely that you'd forgive 488 more times?

So, let's add a little reality. Pastor Wendy loaned me a video on forgiveness by Rob Bell and in it he makes the point that there may be people who are just toxic to you, and while you may forgive them, while you may wish them well and hope and pray for them, you don't need to make yourself available to be mistreated by them. So forgive the chairperson, but call ahead before the next scheduled meeting. Or maybe find a new committee.

But there's another thing I've learned in the past few years. For many of us, lurking just below the surface of what seems to be a normal, happy, suburban life, is some hidden injury, some sorrow, some tragedy that has shaped that life. And as I've come to know you, I've come to know some of these injuries and tragedies, and they are real. And we carry them around, these unresolved angers and frustrations and disappointments for which forgiveness needs to be offered or sought. Because if we can forgive, or if we can be forgiven, then we can move on and become the people God wants us to be. But if we can't forgive or if we can't be forgiven, then we're stuck, stuck in reliving and re-experiencing a painful past.

Peter talks about forgiveness as if it is a burden – do I have to forgive seven times? Many of us think about it the same way. But when we do that, when we think of forgiveness as a favor we offer to others, we ignore some important things. First, we ignore the fact that we who forgive in one area of our lives probably need and seek forgiveness in some other part. Like the unforgiving servant, none of us is perfect. Second, we ignore the fact that we who forgive are also freed from the past – if I can forgive you, then I can come back into relationship with you and get on with my life.

If I can't forgive you, I'm as stuck in my injury as you are in your guilt and neither of us is free to be the people God wants us to be.

And perhaps most important, we forgive because we are forgiven – Rob Bell in his video makes the good point that when we refuse to forgive, we are really refusing to trust God who promises to make things right, to make all things new. We're saying, well, God, I think I have a better handle on this problem than you do. I know what needs to be done and I'll take care of it. Do we really think that we are in a position to judge God? That we know God's job better than God does? If that were true why is this thing still weighing you down, why are you still a prisoner to some injury from long ago? Give it to God. God knows hearts, including yours, and God can heal if you can let go.

I feel very privileged to have been part of your lives these past three years. To see our children grow up, though none of the grownups has aged at all. And I feel privileged to return to these texts to see how we've changed and how that changes the way Scripture speaks to us. I think that there will still be things to say. We know that the only real constants in our lives are change and the changeless presence and love of God. May God be praised.

Amen.