

A Way of Life

Matthew 18:21-35

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Peter asks the question, **“how often should I forgive?”** He even suggests a rather extravagant answer, **“As many as seven times?”** Listening to NPR the other night I learned that there is a tribe in southwester Republic of the Congo, that has a word for generous forgiveness. It means something to the effect that I will forgive you most anything once. I may, under extreme circumstances forgive you twice. But, for a third offense I will never forgive, so don't even ask. For this tribe, Peter's suggestion would seem ridiculous. I guess the Congolese do not consider forgiveness a trivial matter. Neither do the rabbis. To forgive once is commanded by Torah. To forgive twice is exemplary. To forgive three times is really over the top and borders on foolishness.

Indeed Peter's question becomes non-trivial for all of us as soon as we move beyond misdemeanor offenses like forgetting an anniversary or spilling coffee onto the carpet in the fellowship hall. The question of forgiveness and how many times it should be exercised becomes an issue of faith when the offense is so monstrous, so deeply hurting, that the thought of any kind of forgiveness, even once, seems totally absurd. Jesus addresses the absurdity of Peter's question and, perhaps, our own misguided notions of forgiveness when he answers, **“I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.”** I did the math. It's 490 times, a ridiculous number. It's a euphemism like 40 years in the wilderness is a lifetime. It's so ridiculous, it would take a lifetime to do it. That's the point. In other words, forgiveness is a way of life, not a way of keeping score.

So, what is forgiveness, exactly? What does it mean to forgive and be forgiven? In the biblical languages of Hebrew and Greek, the word for forgive means **“to let go.”** It carries the sense of both freeing and being freed. In one of our orders for confession and forgiveness we speak of being in bondage to sin, absolutely unable to free ourselves. Sometimes that bondage is the imprisonment we experience because of our inability to let go of injustices, abuses, and offenses committed against us. Our bondage is our own insatiable desire to even the score, maybe to right the unrightable wrong. We become imprisoned in our own unforgiveness.

Several years ago now there was a horrible school bus accident in Edwardsburg, Michigan. Apparently, an elementary school girl was run over by her bus driver, who was backing up to pull out onto the road. It was a truly tragic moment that was gruesomely exploited by the press and mangled by a justice system that was impotently trying to even the score. In other ways it was a truly American moment as the whole community scrambled about trying to fix the blame rather than just fix the mirrors on the bus. Unable to either fix or forgive, the grandfather of the child subsequently took his own life over this affair. Such is the terrible price of unforgiveness.

Could it be that we all know some deep pain that, at least in part, enslaves us, some grievance that kidnaps our dreams and shackles the fullness of our joy. Perhaps that pain is so pervasive and unrelenting that it even threatens your very existence. This is the place where the question of forgiveness becomes a question of life or death.

To forgive is to let go of the past, while reaching for the future. That is the forgiveness we are promised in our baptism and that is affirmed in the bread and wine of Holy Communion. God lets go of our sins in order that we might walk in newness of life, not once, not twice, not even seventy times seven, but as a way of being God with us, each day, all day, for as long as we live. Extravagant? Oh yes. God lets go of our sin in order that we might walk in newness of life, not the same old destructive path that got us into trouble. Part of that newness of life is the freedom to forgive others. The debtor in the parable who was forgiven his debt refuses to let go of others. The deeper meaning of the parable is that he is imprisoned, not by the king, but by his own unwillingness to be truly free. In the same sense, we are only as forgiven, even by God, as we are willing to forgive others. Is that not what we pray

every Lord's day, forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us? In other words, by letting go of the sins of others, we are set free to experience newness of life. It's an amazing thing.

Consider the story of Betty, not her real name of course, but a real story, told to me some years back. I have shared her story with you before, but it bears repeating. Betty was a battered spouse. Psychologists would say that her abuse at the hands of her ultra-religious father set her up for an abusive marriage. In any case, she suffered five years under the tyranny of Jim, who in the course of their marriage, blackened both of her eyes, bloodied her nose, and sent her to the hospital with two fractured ribs. After each occasion, following Jim's tearful contrition and promises to reform, Betty forgave Jim – more than seven times. At least that was what she thought she was doing. Betty was very religious. She went to her family church and prayed a lot. She prayed that she would be wise enough, loving enough, and cautious enough to not provoke Jim's anger. After all, she thought, it must be at least partly her fault that Jim hit her. She prayed that Jim would change, that he would stop drinking and gambling his paychecks away. She prayed that God would intervene. Her prayers, it seemed to her went unheard and unanswered.

So, Betty changed. One day while Jim was at work, she packed a suitcase and left. She left her home, her church, her family, and her God. She divorced Jim and no one heard from her for another five years. Then one day, quite unexpectedly, Betty approached Jim in the parking lot of a neighborhood grocery store. What she said to him went something like this, as told to me:

“Jim, I don't expect that what I am about to say to you will change you, but it has changed me and I want to share it with you anyway. I forgive you, Jim. For years I could not say that. The day I left you, I fell victim to what I believe is the same demon that has possessed you all these years, anger, even rage.

Maybe I needed that anger just to get away from you, but I discovered that even though I had left you, I took the hate and resentment and deep disappointment along with me. They owned me and consumed me. They drove a wedge between me and my God. I tried going to church again, but felt empty and abandoned. My anger and resentment of you drove poisoned every relationship I tried to form with others. I felt so lonely I even tried to end my life. That was my greatest sin. Yet somehow in that darkest moment of my life, I remembered what Jesus said on the cross, “Father, forgive them, they do not know what they are doing.”

In that moment, I realized that I did not know what I was doing. I realized that I, by my own hand, was about to complete what you had begun. It was then, Jim, that I finally let go of you. I let go of my fear and anger. I let go of my resentment of all the times you hurt me and all the times I tried to appease you. For the first time in my life, I felt truly free. I thank God for that, Jim. God has answered my prayers. As God has forgiven me, I forgive you.”

Betty told me that story. She is now remarried, has three children and volunteers much of her time to a shelter for battered women. She prays and worships with a congregation that celebrates God's grace. The power of forgiveness has transformed and redeemed her life. Betty knows that it is a way of life and not a score.

I have told you some of my own forgiving and unforgiving stories. A couple month ago I went to look up an old high school nemesis that, I confessed, had no safe passage through my mind. My goal was to look him up, call him up, tell him I forgive him the broken nose he blessed me with all those years ago. I somehow felt it important to say that to him personally, even if he had no recollection at all of the incident. But as I told you all the following week, I discovered that the offender had died a year ago. As the Holy Spirit works in mysterious ways, I was asked to give the invocation at our 50th high school reunion. As part of that prayer, I remembered in prayer all those classmate who have died. He was on that list.

Forgiveness is a way of life as much as unforgiveness is a way of death. It all begins in prayer. Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.