

From Victims to Healers
Matthew 18: 21 – 35

(preached October 20, 2024)

In a group of friends, there's often one person who's eager and willing to ask the tough questions. Among the disciples, it's Peter. When the other disciples hold back, you can count on Peter to speak up. In our passage for today, he has a question for Jesus. He asks Jesus, "How many times do I forgive a brother or sister who sins against me? Seven times?"

If you're wondering how Peter came up with the number seven, it helps to know that the religious teachers of the time had a specific teaching about forgiveness. In Jesus' time, the rabbis taught, "If a man transgresses one time, forgive him. If a man transgresses three times, forgive him. But if a man transgresses four times, do not forgive him."

Peter would have remembered this teaching from his religious education. But he's being a little creative here. He takes this limited number of times to forgive, multiplies it by two, and adds one. He's increasing the number of times forgiveness is required – he's more than doubling it. So we might imagine him sitting back with a smile and saying, "Look at how much I'm willing to forgive! Am I a great guy or what?"

And we can imagine that Peter is flabbergasted when Jesus answers, "How about seventy times seven?"

From what we know about Jesus, it's unlikely that he has a specific number in mind. Jesus generally didn't focus on specifics like that. By saying we should forgive seventy times seven times, he's more likely saying that the number of times we're called to forgive is more than we can calculate. The number of times we're called to forgive is beyond all calculations. It's not really about calculations. He's saying, "Don't even think about counting, Peter. Just do it. Forgive."

Then, as he often did, Jesus expands on this saying with a parable. In the Bible translation *The Message*, Jesus says, "There was once a king who decided to square accounts with his servants. As he got under way, one servant was brought before him who had run up a debt of over one hundred thousand dollars. The servant couldn't pay up, so the king ordered the man, along with his wife, children, and all his [belongings] to be auctioned off at the slave market" (Eugene Peterson – *The Message*).

The man begged the king not to do this. His debt was huge, an amount he could never hope to pay off. So he begged the king to forgive his debt. And the king forgave him. He says, "OK – your debt is forgiven. Your slate is wiped clean."

How do you imagine the servant feels when the king forgives his debt? For us today, the parable might go something like this: Your credit card is maxed out, and you

owe more than you can ever hope to pay. The interest rate has just gone up again and the balance due increases every day. You know it's going to keep going up until you'll never be able to pay it off. So you call the credit card company. You beg them to do something. Something, anything, so you don't get further in the hole.

And you're astounded when the person at the credit card company says, "OK. We'll erase the balance. You don't owe us anything now." How would you feel? Relieved? Elated? Exhilarated?

You feel great, so you go out to celebrate. On your way to the party, you bump into a co-worker who owes you some money he borrowed for lunch last week. You say, "Hey, where's that money you owe me? Pay up!" Your coworker says he can't pay you just yet. You call your lawyer and tell her to draw up the papers so you can sue the guy for everything he's got.

Something like that happens in the parable Jesus is telling, when the servant runs into another servant who owes him a very small amount, and shows him no mercy. But word gets back to the king. The king calls the servant before him again. He says, "You evil servant! I forgave your entire debt when you begged for mercy. Shouldn't you be compelled to be merciful to your fellow servant who begged for mercy [from you]?" (Peterson) And he sends the servant off to be harshly punished.

When Peter asks how many times he should forgive, he has numbers on his mind. But Jesus says that, when it comes to forgiveness, numbers don't have much to do with it. Jesus says God is willing to go beyond any limits in forgiving us. So we shouldn't put limits on our forgiveness of one another.

For Jesus, forgiveness is something we do because we've received God's forgiveness. God forgives us; we forgive others, as Jesus taught us to pray, "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." You could say that forgiveness is woven into our relationship with God. Because we're in relationship with God, we receive God's forgiveness. Because we're in relationship with God, we respond to God's call to forgive others. God's forgiveness of us, and our forgiveness of others, go hand in hand.

Jesus is saying, Peter, don't put limits on the number of times you forgive. Your love for others, like God's love for you, isn't about limits. Today I imagine he might say, our relationship with God is not like a health care plan with a limited number of visits to the doctor. It's not about the quantity of forgiveness; it's about the quality of life that you and I can enjoy, when we know we're forgiven by God. Our relationship with God is about the quality of life we can enjoy with others, forgiving them when they hurt us, and receiving their forgiveness when we hurt them.

Does Jesus mean that we forgive automatically, without even talking to the person who hurt us? Do we forgive automatically, even when the offender doesn't admit the wrong? I don't think the forgiveness he's talking about is automatic. It's not something

we do without thinking. It may not happen overnight. Forgiveness is something we work *toward*. Earlier in the same conversation, Jesus spoke of the need to address a wrong. When someone hurts you, he says, tell them, directly. Take it up with them directly and give them a chance to make it right. When you talk to the person who has wronged you, you're always working toward forgiveness, not revenge. As a follower of Jesus, you're always working toward forgiveness because forgiveness is woven into your relationship with God.

When you and I forgive after we've been hurt, we might think our forgiveness will do something for the person who has hurt us. Often, it does. But when we forgive, it also does something for us. Some years ago, South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu and his daughter wrote a book about forgiveness. It's called *The Book of Forgiving*. I highly recommend this book and if you'd like to borrow it, I'd be glad to lend it to you.

In *The Book of Forgiving*, Tutu says that forgiving is hard work, but it is good for us. Of course forgiving is good for us spiritually, but it's also good for our minds. It's good for our bodies. Tutu says that psychologists and neuroscientists have discovered that when we forgive we're not as likely to suffer from depression and anger. We're more likely to be hopeful. We're more likely to be connected spiritually, and more self-confident emotionally (*The Book of Forgiving*, p. 17). When we forgive, we're less at risk for physical problems like heart disease, high blood pressure, ulcers, and migraines.

Forgiveness isn't only about what we can do for someone else. When we forgive, it does something for us. It helps our spirits, our minds, and our bodies. And, in a larger sense, when we forgive, it changes the way we look at ourselves. When we've been hurt, it's difficult to process the pain. We feel wounded. We might even define ourselves by our wounds. Those feelings of hurt can make us see ourselves as victims. We might see ourselves as the victims of events beyond our control. But when we forgive after we've been hurt, we are no longer victims. We may have been wounded, but when we forgive we are no longer victims of a hurt that has been done to us. When we forgive, we become healers, taking an active part in our own healing and in the healing of others.

The Dutch priest Henri Nouwen has written about forgiveness. He says that forgiving does not mean forgetting. He writes, "When we forgive a person [who has wounded us], the memory of the wound might stay with us for a long time [the memory may stay with us throughout our lives]. But forgiveness changes the way we remember. Forgiveness converts the curse into a blessing."

Nouwen goes on, "For example, when we forgive our parents for their divorce, [or] our children for their lack of attention, [or] our friends for their unfaithfulness in a crisis, [or] our doctors for their ill advice, we no longer have to see ourselves as the victims of events over which we had no control. Forgiveness allows us to claim our power and not let these events destroy us; [When we forgive, those events] become events that deepen the wisdom of our hearts."

You may remember a story of the power of forgiveness that was in the news some years ago. A community in Pennsylvania responded with forgiveness to a horrific crime. In Amish country, in the town of Nickel Mines, a local man entered a school. The man was deeply disturbed. He had a gun. When he entered the school, he ordered the boys to leave. He opened fire on the girls. Five of the girls survived. Five of them died. Then the gunman took his own life.

The Amish people are people of deep faith. Not long after they suffered that devastating act of violence, they extended forgiveness to the killer's widow and his family.

Many people in our country were stunned. Reporters asked the Amish how they could forgive such a horrific crime so quickly. They responded that forgiveness is the central teaching of Jesus. They said forgiveness is hard work, but "if we don't forgive, we won't be forgiven." Members of the Amish community say, "Nothing will ever be the same here." They get up each morning and begin the hard work of forgiveness again. They will not let what happened shake their faith or change their way of life (*U.S. News and World Report*, March 26 – April 2, 2007, pp. 24 – 28). Members of that community refuse to be defined by their wounds. They refuse to be defined by the horrible thing that was done to them.

Jesus taught us to pray, "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." Forgiveness is hard work. But forgiveness is woven into our relationship with God. God forgives us, and calls us to forgive the people who hurt us. Forgiveness is something we do for others, but it's also good for us.

When we forgive those who have hurt us, we are no longer defined by hurtful things that have been done to us. We no longer say, "I am who I am because of the people who have hurt me." When we forgive, it changes the way we look at ourselves. We are transformed from victims to healers. We become part of God's holy work of healing. By God's grace and with God's help, we become our true selves, the women and men God created us to be.

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Pentecost 22