

“77 Times”

Jesus is one tough customer. I think most of us would agree with that. He heals people who might not deserve it in the eyes of the world. He feeds people regardless of their need. He casts demons out of Jews and Gentiles. He calls a tax collector to be one of his disciples. He eats meals with well-known sinners, despite being condemned for that behavior by the religious establishment. He sets an example for a life of love and caring that is impossible to follow. Even our greatest saints have lives that pale in comparison to Jesus. Today’s reading from Matthew is yet another time that Jesus sets an impossibly high bar for us to hurdle.

Last week’s reading from Matthew, which immediately precedes today’s, regards our need to realize we have caused injury and to ask for forgiveness. However, it puts the onus on the injured to confront the one who has caused the hurt. If the person who injured us does not realize what they have done, we are called to challenge that person one-on-one. If that does not work, we are to get a few others to go with us. If that doesn’t work, we are to call out the offender in the presence of the entire faith community. Finally, when all else fails, that person should be banished from the community.

Peter follows this up with a question. He asks Jesus, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Peter, being the Biblical “Everyman” who represents you and me and our unoriginal thinking, offers what he thinks is a generous number of times to forgive someone. He offers seven times, harking to the Hebrew Scriptures where seven was considered the number of completeness. Think of the seven days of creation, the seven years of sabbatical of the land, allowing it to lie fallow and rest every seventh year. To sit shiva is the seven-day period of mourning after a person’s death. The menorah has seven candles. Indeed, the Hebrew word for seven (*sheva*) shares the same consonantal root as the word for “fullness” or “completion” (*savah*, שבע). *Sheva* represents divine completion, wholeness, and covenantal fullness.

Peter thinks that if you hurt me seven times, you have gotten all the chances you deserve. Your opportunities to hurt me are complete. Inevitably Jesus goes further. He tells Peter, “Not seven times,” and I imagine he pauses here, and Peter thinks that Jesus will offer a lower number. Then Jesus continues, “...but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.”¹ Peter once again underestimates Jesus. But as the Everyman, Peter says and does the things that the rest of us are likely to say or do. Notice that he does not question Jesus’ admonition to forgive seventy-seven times. Peter knows that Jesus is not being literal. Seventy-seven is a stand-in for the more plainly said, “As many times as it takes.” God forgives you infinitely, and so must you forgive each other.

Certain parts of the Church have misused this concept over the millennia. Even to this day, there are those who claim to be Christian who use this teaching of Jesus to entrap the powerless, the poor, children, and especially women in abusive relationships, marriages, or situations where their power to protect themselves and those they love is limited.

¹ The Greek text can also be translated “seven times seventy times”

This passage, among others in the Bible, has been used to keep women in abusive marriages and relationships. It has given them no legal recourse in such situations. While we have seen some changes in the law in the last fifty years, we still find a need for shelters for abused women, because the legal system often discounts the complaints of women, which keeps them in perilous circumstances. Circumstances that can lead to their deaths and the deaths of their children.

Just in case Peter or any of the other disciples did not understand, he tells them a parable. There is a man who owes his master ten thousand talents. A talent was equal to one year's wages. That is ten thousand years' worth of work. This is not a realistic debt, but we know that Jesus uses hyperbole to make his point. In this case, it is a debt impossible for a laborer to pay off. The master is going to sell of this man and his family to obtain some compensation for the debt. The debt won't be retired, but it will get the scoundrel out of his sight. The man begs for more time (a rather unreasonable request given the enormity of the debt), but the owner relents.

As soon as the indebted slave leaves, he encounters someone who owes him a much smaller sum. It is one hundred denarii, which is about one-third of a talent. This will hardly help him pay off his ten thousand talent debt. When this fellow asks for additional time, the first slave does not give him the reprieve he had received. Instead, he has this man put in prison. He received mercy, but he would not give it.

When the master hears about this, he has the first man brought back to him. He reprimands him for not showing mercy, as he had received mercy. Instead of selling him and his family or putting him in prison, the master has him tortured. The slave's inability to show mercy gets him a much worse punishment than just his indebtedness.

Jesus, through his hyperbole, is making the point that in the Kingdom of Heaven forgiveness is boundless even when our sins are incredibly onerous. We know this because we pray to be as generous in forgiving as God is. In the words Jesus taught us, we pray, "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." It is on us to forgive so that we will be forgiven.

However, it seems to be in our nature that we do not forgive easily. When we see true forgiveness, we are astounded. Such as the Amish community after a school full of children were murdered, or the families of those killed in the Charleston Church Massacre who forgave the perpetrators of these heinous crimes. They also promised to pray for the killers and even reached out in care to the killers' families.

I doubt it was easy. They are just as human as you and me. Instead of letting their instincts for retribution and revenge win over them, they followed Jesus. They also knew that carrying the burden of anger and hate would not do them or the victims any good. They knew that demanding their pound of flesh would not do any good either. Revenge may be a dish best served cold, but it is also one that does not satisfy. It winds around our heart like a parasitic vine, strangling out love, joy, and hope.

True forgiveness is a balm for our souls. It gives us a clear view ahead without the ever-present clouds of anger that suck the life out of us. It helps us love more clearly and dearly every person we meet. It helps us live in love and not fear. It helps us carry on despite the grief of our hurts and losses. Jesus told us twenty centuries

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ago that the human heart burdened with anger and pain becomes stone. The only way through that is forgiveness. It is a gift we give ourselves as much as the one who hurt us. True forgiveness can be a gift that keeps on giving as long as we recognize that it is a gift that we cannot earn or merit, but has been given to us by God out of love for each of us as a beloved child.