

Proper 19, Year A
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I'm with Peter - I'm more comfortable with limits on forgiveness.

Peter asks Jesus - *"How many times am I to forgive? As many as 7 times?"*

Peter surely knew that all good Jewish rabbis of that time held that forgiving someone 3 times was all that was required. But Peter, figuring Jesus would probably require more than that, doubled it and even added one. He must have been floored by Jesus' response - *"I tell you seventy-seven times."* In other words, lose count when it comes to forgiving!

Now that is a challenge in our lives. With some effort, we can manage it with the small stuff, and indeed that is a good place to begin practicing forgiveness. But what about the big stuff? What if you lose your home because of the unscrupulous actions of predatory lenders? What if someone murders someone you love? With the 7th anniversary of September 11, 2001 just past, we might wonder, What about people who fly planes into towers, or rain down terror in other ways? What then? Can forgiveness take place when all we feel is anger to the point of rage?

Really, anger is not the problem when it comes to forgiveness. Anger is a normal human emotion that we feel when we are threatened or hurt in

some way. The real problem comes when we do not move through that emotion. Let me stress that moving through anger is a process which takes time. And the deeper the hurt the more time it may take. But move through anger we must. If we do not, it becomes concretized within us. That is what is known as resentment. Here is a modern day parable about resentment: Resentment is like someone who drinks battery acid and thinks it is the person they are angry with who is going to die. Resentment has a corrosive effect on the spirit and as many medical studies not show, on our bodies as well.

Forgiveness is the antidote to resentment. Yet it is not easily arrived at. That is why when we witness genuine forgiveness taking place, it can take our breath away. Several years ago now, I watched a TV documentary series called *500 Nations*. It chronicled the history of native peoples in the Americas from the time of Columbus up through the present day. In the episode about the Sioux Tribe, the story was told of a terrible battle in which the Sioux and neighboring tribes, who had been peacefully encamped together, were brutally ambushed by the US Army. Following the battle, Sioux Chief, Sitting Bull, surveyed the carnage with a heavy heart. He called his surviving native brothers and sisters to a time of

prayer in which they would pray and mourn for their own lost compatriots, but also for, and I quote him here, "*the brave white men who now also lay upon this ground.*" In those words of Sitting Bull I hear echoes of Jesus teaching on forgiveness: *Seventy-seven times you must forgive.*

But what made it possible for Sitting Bull to forgive that way? What makes it possible for you and me to forgive that way? What makes it possible is an enlarged perspective of ourselves and the part that human sin plays in our lives. Sitting Bull, along with all other forgiving people in countless places and times are able to feel compassion and forgiveness for enemies because they know that they, themselves are not innocent of wrongdoing. One thing necessary to forgiveness is a sense of one's own sinfulness and the experience of having been forgiven nonetheless.

That's what Jesus is getting at in the Gospel parable this morning. The slave who owed a great debt to his master was forgiven that debt, but was unable, for whatever reason, to receive that forgiveness. As he goes on his way he meets someone that owes him a very small debt. But since it is true that you cannot give what you have not received, he offer no forgiveness toward his fellow slave, showing him only harshness. The moral of the story? The ability to forgive beyond all imagination comes

from the experience of being forgiven beyond all imagination. And that experience is at the heart of what we claim in our baptism - God's forgiveness for all humanity, come among us in the person of Jesus Christ.

Having said all that about forgiveness, I feel compelled to say a few things about what forgiveness is not. Forgiveness is not about giving into abuse. It is not about staying in relationships and situations which are injurious to us. Forgiveness is not about accepting unacceptable behavior from someone else, no matter how much we love them. And forgiveness is not about forgetting. I would love to expunge the phrase, "*forgive and forget*" from our language! And forgiveness does not have much to do with warm fuzzies.

It is possible, I believe, to forgive someone, and still not like them very much. Here I think of the father of one of the Oklahoma City Bombing victims, who opposed the death penalty for Timothy McVie. He explained that he didn't at all like Timothy McVie, or what he espoused, but he had forgiven him. It seems to me, that we can know we are forgiving someone when we can begin seeing them as a person who, like ourselves, is loved by and created in the image of God, and who has as much right to exist as we do.

Many people cling to the promise that God will make it all right in the end. I know that in times like ours, it is popular to think that promise means that those who intentionally harm others will get their own serving of terror for the rest of eternity. That is one possibility of what is to come, but not long ago a retreat leader challenged me with another. She asked all of us assembled for the retreat, *"Who do you think you will see in God's Kingdom, come the end of time? Will Hitler be there? What about AidiAmine? What about the person who has hurt you most in this life – will that person be there? Who will be there?"* After a long pause, she gave her own one word answer into the stunned silence of the room. She said, *"Everyone."* Can we bear the thought of that?

Our first hymn, in describing the heavenly city of Zion says *"with salvations walls surrounded, thou may's't smile at all thy foes."* I used to hear that as describing a fortress in which those who had lived reasonably good, reasonably faithful lives would be eternally well protected from their foes. On the other hand, all those who had consorted with evil in this life would suffer in the outer darkness beyond those walls. But now I wonder – isn't it more likely that those walls will be all embracing – taking everyone in, as the retreat leader suggested?

Maybe the difference between heaven and hell is simply a matter of how one deals with that radical inclusiveness. Could it be that those in that heavenly city who wear the heavenly smile described in our hymn, are those who learned to forgive in this life, and so can coexist with their foes in eternity? The transition to that sort of reality could be a hell of a thing for those who have not learned forgiveness. Well, no one knows for sure. But I'm hedging my bets, and I'm going to work on forgiveness a little bit each day.

In the name of one who has loved and forgiven best of all, Christ Jesus. Amen+