

**Message: “Can You Forgive?”<sup>1</sup>**

**Here’s a question, “Can you forgive?”** It’s like Peter’s question from scripture, “*How many times must we forgive?*” (Matthew 18:21). It’s one of those questions we know how we’re supposed to answer, but it’s harder to do in practice than in theory. When we gather and hear the narrative where Jesus tells Peter about unlimited forgiveness and grace, we think, “Of course. We worship a forgiving God, and we know we need God’s forgiveness over and over again.” But then we realize this means we are to forgive those who offend us, over and over again. And then we wonder if that’s even possible. Let’s look a little deeper into what Jesus is telling us together.

**Last week, Jesus spoke about reconciliation.** This is a primary work of faith. It’s how we create community with one another. So, Peter comes up afterward, eager to show he’s been listening. Peter says, “Hey, Jesus, suppose someone in the family does something really bad to me, how often should I forgive?”

**Then Peter plays his ace, “as many as seven times?”** Most Rabbis of the time would say you need to forgive three times to follow the law of Moses. So, Peter goes out on a limb and says seven times. I can’t help but think he expected Jesus to say something like, “Hold on there, Peter. Forgiveness is a good thing, but let’s not get carried away. I mean three is pretty good. Four is out of the park. Seven? Don’t be ridiculous!”

**But, as we know, that isn’t what Jesus said.** He did math right there in Peter’s face. Seventy-seven times, or seventy times seven. Which is it? Doesn’t matter, it wasn’t math; it was and is grace. Jesus wasn’t giving us a checklist, a counter or a limit where, once we reach it, we stop. No, he was talking about infinite grace. Jesus steps into eternity for a moment to describe a new reality. There is a different way of keeping score. Instead of measuring slights against us, we begin living by the grace offered to us. Instead of counting points of division, we measure the ways we can come together. It’s a different kind of scale, or more appropriately, a different way of living.

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<sup>1</sup> Some material drawn from <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/the-journey-begins/sixteenth-sunday-after-pentecost-year-a-lectionary-preaching-notes/sixteenth-sunday-after-pentecost-year-a-preaching-notes>

**Then Jesus takes the time to explain why.** And he does it through a story, which we expect since this is how he taught. And this one is a doozy. If you ever wonder whether Jesus had a sense of humor, this parable is good evidence.

**As the story goes, a king wanted to settle accounts with his subjects.** So, he calls one of them who owes ten thousand talents. I'll pause here. We are dealing with Roman measures of money. Depending on which historian you read, this was either the equivalent of the gross domestic product of a relatively large nation or 150,000 years of average wages. In other words, there is no way they could have such a debt. It's hyperbole, an exaggeration, an amount which is impossible to pay. But the debtor's response is, "Be patient with me, and I'll pay it all." 150,000 years would take a lot of patience. For some reason, the king decided to just forgive the debt, wiping the entire amount off the books. I guess they didn't want to wait 150,000 years for their money.

**But then the plot thickens.** The person who was forgiven the enormous debt runs across someone who owed them one hundred denarii. Now a Roman denarius was a day's wage. So, the debt was 100 days' worth of cash - not a small amount, to be sure. But Jesus says, "Think about it. 150,000 years equals 1.8 million months." 1.8 million to 3 seems outrageous, to say the least. No wonder everyone got upset. The lesson of "pay it forward" was missed. The idea of mercy went right over their head. "Me-first" won over loving your neighbor. Now the first person is going to jail until they can pay the entire debt. Yes, you could be put in jail for debt back in Jesus' time.

**Besides bad behavior or bad decision-making, what's the point?** We're all in debt? Or have we all been set free from a debt we couldn't pay in 150,000 years?

**Salvation is being set free to live as though we were already a part of the family of God, because we are.** Our basic response can be forgiveness. We can lead with grace. This is the invitation Jesus gives us. Let's not count how many times we forgive someone until we reach a magic number which allows us to walk away or, worse yet, take some sort of vengeance on them for being so mean to us. Just forgive.

**We know we aren't living in forgiving times.** Even a glance at the news will tell us that. When we're divided into us and them, forgiveness rarely enters the conversation. Do we hear this call from our Lord as a call to live counterculturally? Are we to swim against the tide of anger, vengeance and hatred, and present a different face to the world? Isn't this risky, this forgiveness thing? Well, yes. If we're doing it right. It will be risky, scary and world-changing. It will be transformative if we take forgiveness seriously.

**Can we give space to accept forgiveness and to offer it?** Can we call one another to set aside grudges, suspicions and prejudices long enough to even consider what it means to be forgiving? How can we challenge ourselves to see the personal impact this grace would have on us and those around us?

**Maybe we need a workshop on forgiveness, or at least space to understand and learn about what forgiveness is and what it isn't.** This isn't something we can really do during worship. But we can plant some seeds. We can invite our friends, family and neighbors to consider what a life of forgiveness might look like in our real-world living. And most important, maybe we can give the Spirit space to work in us, and on us, as we wrestle with this forgiveness thing.

**A question was asked this week, "Shouldn't we wait until the person asks us before we forgive?"** This is a great question. It's easy to see both sides. One view says, "If the person doesn't show remorse and they have no intent to reconcile, forgiveness doesn't seem meaningful." Another view says, "Forgiveness is offered no matter what because forgiveness also affects the one offering forgiveness." Holocaust survivor Corrie Ten Boom said, "Forgiveness is setting the prisoner free, only to find out the prisoner was you." What we hold onto can harm our body and soul.

**You decide for yourself, but before you do, let me offer one more example.** In the last few minutes of his life, while hanging on the cross, Jesus said, "*God, forgive them for they don't know what they are doing*" (Luke 23:34). Not even one of those who put him on the cross was asking for forgiveness. They were making fun of Jesus, yet he forgave them. We all fall short (Romans 6:23). We all need forgiveness.

**There's good in forgiveness.** Forgiveness encourages compassion. You can relate to others as part of the human experience. You feel for others as you do for yourself. When you forgive, you're no longer emotionally and psychologically encumbered, you can begin to put the past behind you. You won't be caught up in harmful rumination. Believe it or not, Dr. Abigail Brenner wrote an article "5 Reasons Why It's Important to Forgive" in Psychology Today. They include: "when you forgive someone, you forgive yourself; forgiving gets you out of victim mode; forgiving frees you; forgiveness helps your mental, emotional and physical health, and forgiving helps you move on a spiritual path."<sup>2</sup> Forgiveness is an act of kindness and goodness. It is a path to peace. Forgive and let healing begin.

**One final thought: Jesus doesn't say we've got to sit there and take whatever meanness or oppression other people dish out.** He doesn't say we must put ourselves in harm's way to be the forgiving types he wants us to be. We can be forgiving from a distance. We can protect ourselves and those in our care by removing ourselves from a toxic situation.

**But, when we forgive, we are set free from suffering and oppression.** We can escape from the isolation, loneliness and meaningless way of life we can find ourselves living. As a minimum, we can be honest with ourselves and with God as we realize how often we ask the question, "Can I forgive?"

**I hope and pray your answer is "Yes, I do forgive you."** For this is the way of life and the work of faith for all eternity. May the pardon and healing grace of our Lord be with you, today and always.

*Let us pray ...*

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/blog/in-flux/202009/5-reasons-why-its-important-forgive>

**Matthew 18:21-35 (CEB)**

Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Should I forgive as many as seven times?”

Jesus said, “Not just seven times, but rather as many as seventy-seven times. Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. When he began to settle accounts, they brought to him a servant who owed him ten thousand bags of gold. Because the servant didn’t have enough to pay it back, the master ordered that he should be sold, along with his wife and children and everything he had, and that the proceeds should be used as payment. But the servant fell down, kneeled before him, and said, ‘Please, be patient with me, and I’ll pay you back.’ The master had compassion on that servant, released him, and forgave the loan.

“When that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him one hundred coins. He grabbed him around the throat and said, ‘Pay me back what you owe me.’

“Then his fellow servant fell down and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I’ll pay you back.’ But he refused. Instead, he threw him into prison until he paid back his debt.

“When his fellow servants saw what happened, they were deeply offended. They came and told their master all that happened. His master called the first servant and said, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you appealed to me. Shouldn’t you also have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?’ His master was furious and handed him over to the guard responsible for punishing prisoners, until he had paid the whole debt.

“My heavenly Father will also do the same to you if you don’t forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”