

Sermon for Proper 19A  
Sunday, September 17, 2023  
“Limitless Grace”

Text: Matthew 18:21-35

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today’s gospel passage comes during a discussion between Jesus and his followers as to how to maintain good relationships within the community of followers that was forming. Earlier in Chapter 18, Jesus addressed issues of humility (“Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”), accountability (“If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away.”), and reconciliation where we try to repair broken relationships. You recall last week’s Gospel lesson in which Jesus addressed how the community was to deal with conflicts among themselves by confronting each other and, if necessary, bringing disputes before the larger body in an effort to mend broken relationships. That led Jesus to remind the disciples that forgiveness is essential. Peter asked Jesus a sincere and valid question: How much should we forgive? Peter’s question to Jesus reflects the struggle that we all have as to how far we should go, just how much we should take when others do us wrong. Jesus’s answer was that our forgiveness of others should mirror the limitless mercy that God has toward us.

Today’s Gospel says that Peter came to Jesus and asked him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.” Other translations of the Bible say “seventy *times* seven.” That number is often considered to be a more accurate translation of the original Greek text.

*Seventy times seven!* That is 490. That’s a lot of times, but the exact number is not important. Jesus was not telling Peter that a person gets 490 chances at forgiveness and no more! No, Jesus was exaggerating to get his point across: that our forgiveness should be as limitless as God’s mercy is toward us. 490 is undoubtedly more times that any one of us will probably ever have to forgive any one person for the same wrong, but it drives home Jesus’s point.

Then Jesus told a parable that was even more extreme. A lord (*i.e.*, a wealthy land owner) wished to settle accounts with his slaves—they were slaves because they owed a debt to him. One of his slaves owed him 10,000 talents. Now one talent was equivalent to several years’ wages, so 10,000 talents was an enormous amount—more than a lifetime. How much is that in today’s terms? (I had to look this up and use an online calculator.) An annual salary of \$30,000 multiplied by 5 years means that talent might be worth \$150,000. Adjusting for inflation for the last 2,023 years, that comes out to ten thousand trillion trillion dollars. That’s 10 followed by 30 zeros. There isn’t that much money in the world today, and is probably more than all the money that has ever existed in the whole of human history. According to the parable, it would have been impossible for anyone to have ever earned that much; the slave could never have paid

his debt. It was even more than the lord owned...and that was exactly the point. The lord forgave an impossible amount of debt because his forgiveness had no limits. That's the kind of limitless forgiveness that God has for us. That's the limitless forgiveness that God expects us to have for one another.

But forgiveness cannot happen simply in the silence of our hearts and minds; it requires confrontation. That's what we heard in last week's gospel. To begin the process of forgiveness, the wrongdoer must be confronted. That is not an easy thing to do. Most of us don't like conflict, and it is often difficult to talk to the person who has done us wrong. Sometimes it is impossible; the other person may not want to talk to us or may not even be available. The effort still should be made, because until we confront them, we cannot tell that person that they are forgiven. Until we start with a conversation, the ultimate goal cannot be met. That's one of the problems we face these days in our society is that we don't want to start the conversation. Folks, especially in politics, refuse to talk to each other, much less work with each other, because they don't want to talk with members of the opposite political party. Angry people would rather vandalize or inflict violence on others, rather than sit together and talk about why they are angry or feel disrespected. We don't even want to address problems in our own personal relationships. Often we want to hold things in rather than confront the problem and move forward.

The ultimate goal of forgiveness is reconciliation—the healing of a relationship that has been broken. A broken relationship with someone is ultimately a break in our relationship with God, and so one way to begin the healing process is through our own reconciliation with God. In the church, we have a sacramental rite for that; it is the confession or sacrament of reconciliation, where we name the brokenness in our own lives and relationship and receive absolution so that the brokenness is put behind us. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we are reconciled to God and can start anew.

Forgiveness and reconciliation help us move forward in our lives. Jesus pointed out what happens when we don't do that in the second part of the parable. The slave whose debt had been forgiven wasn't willing to forgive the debts owed to him, so his debt relief was rescinded by the king; he was forced to pay repay the debt. The slave couldn't move forward because he couldn't forgive. We can't move forward in our own lives if we can't forgive; if we don't forgive, we won't enjoy the peace that comes with reconciliation. That does not mean that we forget the wrong; the power of forgiveness and reconciliation is strengthened in our awareness of the wrong. That's why it is important to confront the wrongdoer and name the wrong.

So, how many times should we forgive when someone does us wrong? The Bible tells us “seventy times seven,” but in reality, we should keep forgiving until we feel like we can't forgive any more...and then we still have to keep on forgiving. Our Father in Heaven never stops forgiving us; he is always willing to show us his unbounded grace, and so we must forgive each other and be reconciled to each other. Ultimately, that will bring us reconciliation with to God. Amen.

## Resources

*Feasting on the Word* for Proper 19 (Year A, Volume 4)

*The Working Preacher*, [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2165](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2165)