

Forgiving 77 Times

By: Meagan McLaughlin

September 13, 2020. In Matthew 18, Jesus tells his disciples that they are to forgive not just seven times, but seventy-seven times. This morning, Pastor Meagan preaches on the challenges of forgiving.

Readings: [Genesis 50:15-21](#), [Romans 14:1-12](#), [Matthew 18:21-35](#)

*** Transcript ***

In the 12-step community, step 9 is the process of making amends — going to those that we've harmed and doing what we can to make things right. As we do this, we often discover that the people we have harmed may also have harmed us, leading us to hold those resentments close. This can make acknowledging our own part in what happened in our relationships very hard to do. After all, who wants to admit that *we* did something that hurt someone, when what *they* did seems so much worse?

The process of sweeping our side of the street, so to speak, is often long, sometimes taking years. As we think about letting go of our own resentments and making amends for what we have done, often sponsors will suggest that we divide our list of people to whom we owe amends into three parts: those to whom we're ready to make amends, those to whom we're willing to consider making amends, and those to whom we are convinced we will never, ever, ever make amends. The harm they have done to us feels insurmountable.

Once the lists are made and the process of making amends begins, we set aside that third list. We start with the first one, and we slowly work our way toward healing and strengthening our relationships, asking God to guide that process. Over time, we find ourselves dipping into the second list, those to whom we were willing to consider making amends. We have experiences of asking for forgiveness, and forgiving ourselves, and we begin to trust this process of letting go of past wrongs.

And often, sometimes when we least expect it, we realize to our surprise that one of those people who was on our third list has moved over to the second. We find ourselves willing to consider forgiving, and acknowledging our own part, to someone we never thought we could possibly forgive. This 12-step wisdom teaches us that forgiveness is not a quick and easy thing. Like Jesse said, there are so many things that can make this a challenging and complicated process. Letting go of what someone else has done, and acknowledging our own mistakes, and taking care of ourselves, and holding good boundaries takes a lot of time. This is not something we expected, or decided, or chose necessarily, but often it becomes something that happened to us, when God stepped in.

And this, I believe, is the main gospel we receive from our readings today. We know from these scriptures that this wisdom is far from new. Joseph was attacked by his brothers. They considered leaving him for dead, and then sold him into slavery, where he lived for years. When they stand in front of him in today's reading from Genesis, we are told that when his brothers ask his forgiveness, and he gives it, Joseph cries. He claims God's work in the healing that's happened in his life, and is happening in his brothers' lives. Yes, they intended harm, and they did it, Joseph tells them. And God transformed it. It didn't happen overnight. It happened over years, as Joseph faithfully followed the path God laid out for him.

Jesus tells his disciples that they are to forgive not just seven times, but seventy-seven times. In Jewish tradition, seven is the number of completion, of wholeness. Seventy is the number of wholeness times

ten, the number of commandments — and we know from our own Lutheran teaching that none of us are capable on our own of keeping those commandments. We try, and we fail. And grace enters in.

I like to say that the reason Jesus tells his disciples to forgive seventy-seven times, not just seven, is that he knew that's what it would take. Over and over, asking for help, taking the step, falling, and starting over again, until we are complete. Whole. And through it all, as Paul tells the Romans, we belong to God. Whether we live, or whether we die, we belong to God.

Last week, love — not love that comes easily, but love that takes time and commitment and work, and ultimately is impossible without God. This week, forgiveness. In the end, it's all about relationships, with ourselves, with others, and with God. Jesus embodies and teaches God's wisdom for our life in community, and it's so core to who God is that it even shows up in the way Jesus taught us to pray! "Forgive us, as we forgive others." And as beloveds who belong to God, we learn that God forgives us, we come to forgive ourselves, too, and understand how connected we are with all of our fellow humans.

When I have struggled to forgive, one of the most powerful ways I've learned to invite God in is to pray the Prayer of St. Francis. You might be familiar with it — "Make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me bring love. Where there is injury, pardon. Where there is doubt, faith."

At a time when I had to frequently encounter people by whom I felt wounded, I would take the time to pray this prayer, for them, and for myself, by name. Asking God to love me and love through me, because I was empty. Asking God to bring healing for my woundedness, and in the process, seeing their woundedness as well. Claiming the faith of God, for them and for myself. I had long drives at that time, and sometimes I would find that it had taken me the entire drive — nearly two hours — just to get through the prayer.

So this morning, I invite you to call to mind someone for whom you would like to pray, someone for whom you feel ready to pray. If you think of someone who you realize is on your third list, that list of people who you will never be ready to forgive, it's okay to set them aside for today. Pick someone else. So having in mind this person that you're ready to pray for today, we will pray the St. Francis Prayer together for them, for ourselves, and for each other. So, take a breath and let us get ready to pray.

Lord, make me a channel of Your peace, not mine, with my sibling

Where there is hatred in me and around me, fill me with your love, and let it overflow so that it surrounds my sibling

Where there is injury in me and around me, fill me with your healing and forgiveness, and let it overflow so that your healing and forgiveness surrounds my sibling

Where there is doubt in me and around me, fill me with your faith, and let it overflow so that your faith surrounds my sibling

Where there is despair in me and around me, fill me with your hope, and let it overflow so that your hope surrounds my sibling

Where there is darkness in me and around me, fill me with your light, and let it overflow so that

your light surrounds my sibling

And where there is sadness in me and around me, fill me with your joy, and let it overflow so that your joy surrounds my sibling

God, Grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled by my sibling as to console them

To be understood by my sibling, as to understand them;

To be loved by my sibling, as to love them;

For it is in giving that we receive, it is in forgiving that we are forgiven,
And it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.

Amen.

*** Keywords ***

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