

“Then Peter came and said to 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.”

What price would you put on forgiveness? How much should it cost? When Peter questions Jesus this morning, the story follows hard on the early verses of this chapter. Chapter 18 of the Gospel of Matthew was once called the handbook of the early church; it’s filled with guides about how we’re to get along as a community called by God. There are instructions, as we heard last week. Instructions we’re expected to follow. If a member of the church is vexing their fellow members, behaving badly or even viciously, then the church is to go tell them to cut it out. And if they don’t quit, well, they are to be treated as tax collectors and sinners.

Now this morning, Peter, ever impetuous Peter, the kind of guy we might think to ourselves, “Peter, Peter, Peter,” believes he entirely understands the instructions. He believes he knows what Jesus means, and he means to show he knows by asking an exemplary question: “How many times, Jesus, should I forgive someone? As many as seven times?”

We can’t know for sure what was going through the mind of Peter when he asked this question, but I think we can get the drift. Peter’s wants to demonstrate how generous of spirit he is, how he fully grasps the instruction of Jesus. You have to admire Peter—he generously offers forgiveness to someone seven times! Let’s face it, for many people, even if it’s only for a social faux pas, forgiving seven times is a huge number of times. I might invite you once or twice to dinner, but not seven times. You never respond. You’ve blown it buddy. I’m not going to invite you even a third time, let alone seven. But not so, it seems, for Peter. How many times should we forgive? As many as seven times.

The answer Jesus offers to Peter’s question is brief in reply, but long in story. Jesus tells Peter that if he means to forgive, he must forgive seventy-seven times. Seventy-seven! Let’s think about that for a moment. What would people think of us if we really kept score like that? What would our spouse, or partner, or friends think of us if we said to them, “That’s it! Pay attention. That was your fifty-fourth forgiveness and you’re running low!” Wouldn’t you think we have a big psychological problem, maybe obsessive-compulsive disorder?

The answer Jesus offers must have given Peter pause. But the parable that follows must have really turned the discussion. Because the story that follows makes something clear to Peter—Peter presumes by his question that he’s the offended one, the one who must forgive others. But what about all the people Peter has offended, people he has hurt with his rash questions and his urgent “me, me, me?” What about the forgiveness Peter and you and I need?

In this parable, a king, and as you will see, it has to be a king, calls all of his servants to account. That’s a normal practice and we get that. What we might not understand is that the servant who owes ten thousand talents owes an enormous sum. We know ten thousand is a big number. But let me translate that number into modern dollars—that’s over a billion dollars. One billion, one whole billion dollars. That’s a number that would give Jeff Bezos, the world’s richest man, pause. What follows is true forgiveness, the kind Peter couldn’t imagine without the help of Jesus; the king forgives the servant at the servant’s request. Forgives the entire sum. All of it. A billion dollars. How likely is that?

Not very likely at all in our world. First world countries hold third world countries to account for that kind of debt. Even when the third world country pleads that they can’t possibly repay their debts and must be forgiven, first world countries don’t forgive. Pay up or suffer. Now if that’s true for countries, how much truer would that be for individuals? How likely in the economy of our time, or any time for that matter, would it be that an individual would be forgiven that enormous sum?

Here’s the point—no one by human standards could forgive like that except a king. Or even better, there’s only one economy by which we can be forgiven and that’s the economy of the kingdom of God. Marxism, socialism or capitalism can’t forgive like that, but God can. God, Jesus seems to say to Peter, forgives us beyond our wildest imaginings.

But that’s not the end of the story. The servant who’s been forgiven this unimaginably large sum later refuses to forgive another servant. To be sure, it’s not a sum like billion dollars but at the same time, the sum is not inconsequential—a week’s worth of wages, maybe even a month. But what does the generously forgiven servant do? He refuses to forgive! And for that, the King means to punish him. We must, Jesus teaches, forgive from our hearts.

There are so many “takeaways” in this story but chief among them must be this—we who have already been forgiven beyond our wildest imaginings, must in turn be as generous to forgive. Yes, you heard that right—we have already been forgiven even before we ask. If we

have been so forgiven, then we must forgive from our hearts, as God has forgiven us. Only once in all the Gospels do we have those words, “forgive from your heart.” This isn’t forced forgiveness, or reluctant forgiveness, this is voluntary, habitual, practiced and loving forgiveness. We, like God, must forgive from our hearts.

You might well be asking of yourself at this moment, “But what about criminals, murders, thieves and such? What about my uncle who left my mother in the lurch? What about my ex?” Jesus answered that last week—go to them, tell them to quit what they’re doing, or pay the price. But remember this, you who have already been forgiven everything, even before you ask, need to be just as generous to the one who has hurt you. Do I like to hear this? Frankly, not really. On first blush, it offends my capitalistic sense of propriety. If you do the crime, you’ve got to do the time, pay the price of punishment, that is. But not so in the economy of the Kingdom of God. Everyone gets forgiven who wants to be forgiven, no matter the offense. Remember what Jesus said, that sinning in your heart is like sinning in deed. Can you imagine the crimes for which at least I am responsible? The crimes I’ve committed in my heart? Only God, and God alone can initiate that kind of forgiveness.

That brings us full circle back to Peter. Does Jesus really expect Peter to forgive as he has been forgiven? More importantly, does Jesus expect us to forgive as we have been forgiven? Yes, in fact, he does. Matthew, the author of this Gospel, was reported to be a tax collector and sinner. Fr. Jed told us this last week. So, when Jesus says to the church, “Let the offender be to you as a tax collector and sinner,” then he’s saying to you, “Let them be your Matthew. Let them be to you as the one who tells you the story of your hope, your salvation, your forgiveness. Be as generous in forgiveness as the king of the universe has been to you. Sure, admonish the offender but remember, before you even knew you had offended, you were forgiven. Forgiven an enormous amount. Forgiven at least a billion dollars of expensive forgiveness.” Amen.

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