

## “TOUGH STUFF: II - HOW MANY TIMES?”

Karen F. Bunnell  
Elkton United Methodist Church  
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Matthew 18:21-35

Leave it to Peter to ask the question. There's always one in the crowd, and that's the one who will step up and actually put a voice to the question that everyone else is thinking, and more often than not, when it came to Jesus and the disciples, that one was Peter. We've seen it over and over again, haven't we? Peter speaks, when everyone else stays silent. When Peter, James and John went upon the mountain with Jesus and he was transfigured, it was Peter who spoke and said, in essence, "How can we make this moment last forever? Let's build three booths - for Moses, Elijah and Jesus - then the moment will never end."

And it was Peter, when Jesus was talking about how He would die, who stepped up and said "No." Everyone else stayed silent.

That was Peter - that was who he was. It doesn't appear that he had many thoughts that just stayed in his head, he had to voice them.

And that's the case in this morning's Gospel lesson. Jesus has just been talking to the disciples about life in the church, and particularly, how to deal with disagreements and problems in the church. He's actually given them a procedure for dealing with issues - when someone sins against you, he says, first go and talk to them directly - face to face. If they don't listen to you, Jesus says, go back and talk to them a second time, but this time take one or two others from the church with you. If they still doesn't listen to you, then, Jesus says, tell it to the church.

So he's just laid all of that out, and obviously everyone's processing just what that means in reality in their minds, and then Peter steps up to the plate. "Okay, Jesus, let's think this through. Let's think about what this really means. Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?"

You know, he just wanted to get this straight. Then he adds, "As many as seven times?" Now, I'm going to guess that Peter was being magnanimous when he said that, because surely Jesus would see how generously forgiving that was - forgiving someone seven times. Come on!

Shockingly, Jesus replies, "Not seven times, Peter, but I tell you, seventy-seven times."

Before Peter and the others could catch their breath - 77 times! - Jesus tells them a story. It's the story of a king who had slaves, and when he went to settle accounts with one of the slaves, he discovered that slave owed him ten thousand talents. When he found out that the slave had no way to repay him, the king decided to sell him and his whole household. But the slave fell on his knees before the king and begged that his life might be spared, and moved with pity, the king forgave the debt and spared the man his life. An amazing gift of grace and forgiveness.

But the story doesn't end there. That same slave goes out, now a free man, and runs into another slave, who happens to owe him money - a hundred denarii (by the way), nowhere near the ten thousand talents the freed man had owed his master. Nevertheless, he demanded the money from the man who owed him. And despite the fact that the man fell to his knees and begged for mercy, he refused to forgive him and had him thrown into prison.

There it was - in living color! That story was Jesus' way of reminding Peter and all of the disciples, and all of us, by the way, that each of us is like that slave who was so deeply indebted to his king and yet forgiven and set free. All of us are deeply indebted to our King, Almighty God, and yet by His love and amazing grace, we have been forgiven and set free to enjoy new life.

Now, Jesus says, if you have been forgiven like that, how can you not forgive someone who has hurt you? Even if it means forgiving 77 times!

As I said last week, and I'll say all the weeks of Lent, this indeed is tough stuff. You and I know, like Peter, how hard it can be to forgive someone who has done us wrong, and hurt us in some way. It's hard to let go of the anger and the hurt. It's hard to learn to trust that person again. It's hard to not want some kind of justice.

But that's not what forgiveness is all about. Forgiveness is all about restoring relationship. Our sins were forgiven on the cross that we might be restored in our relationship with God - a relationship we broke with our sin. God forgave us because He loves us, plain and simple. That's what Jesus wanted Peter and the disciples to remember, especially when they were confronted with dealing with someone who hurt them.

I think Jesus totally understood where Peter was coming from, because Jesus so totally understands our human condition. He knows how we struggle to deal with people who hurt us and betray us, who sin against us. And He knows how the world we live in does not help a bit. It's an eye-for-an-eye, get justice at any cost, get them before they get you again, kind of world. He knows the kind of love and

forgiveness He's asking us to live is counter-cultural and it is tough.

And, Jesus knows some other things as well.

First, that not forgiving someone hurts you. Really hurts you, more than it hurts the one you're not forgiving. I read about something this week that really illustrated to me the truth of that. A national park ranger in British Columbia has two huge sets of moose antlers that are locked together in his office. They are huge - as wide as a man's reach - and they are tightly locked together. Evidently, two bull moose began fighting, their antlers locked, and they could not get free of each other. They died due to anger. (On-line, Sermonillustrations.com)

Anger and unforgiveness can literally take the life out of us. They hurt us in ways we can't begin to understand. Barbara Brown Taylor, in her sermon on this text, comments on the fact that at the end of the story, the king sends the man he had freed, but who had refused to forgive his own slave, to prison. Then she writes, "but his imprisonment is a technicality. The wicked servant was already behind bars, bars of his own making. By refusing to be forgiven and refusing to forgive, he had created his own little Alcatraz, where he sat in solitary confinement with his calculator and kept track of his accounts." (Barbara Brown Taylor, "Once More From the Heart," *Seeds of Heaven*, p. 71)

The person you hurt the most when you don't forgive, is you. Jesus knew that, and that's why he said what he said to Peter.

Jesus also knew that the world desperately needed to see what forgiveness was. He looked around him and saw so many hurting people, and he needed for his followers to be those who modeled forgiveness for others. And still he needs that from us today.

There's an old Ernest Hemingway story that I told you about a long time ago. It's the story of a young boy in Spain named Paco and his father. Paco sinned against his father, hurt him badly, and then he ran away from his home and went to the city of Madrid. Because his father deeply loved him, in spite of the fact that he was so hurt, the father took an ad out in the Madrid newspaper which read, "Paco, meet me at the Hotel Montana, 12 noon Tuesday. All is forgiven. Papa." Now, Paco is a rather common name in Spain, so when the father got to the hotel at noon on Tuesday, there were 800 young men there waiting for their fathers.

Oh friends, we live in a world filled with people hungering for forgiveness, and Jesus says, as we forgive others who have hurt us, we model God's love and amazing grace to this hungering world.

But, you know what? In the end, we don't forgive primarily because

unforgiveness eats away at us, or because the world is hungering for it - we forgive, first and foremost, because we have been forgiven. Again, some words of wisdom from Barbara Brown Taylor:

“It is a matter of understanding that you have already been forgiven, that someone to whom you owe everything - your life and breath, your blue eyes, your fondness for fresh tomatoes, your pleasure in the moon and stars, all the loves of your life - someone who has given and given and given to you, and who has gotten precious little in return, has examined your enormous debt in great detail and knows from your credit rating that the chances of repayment are nil. Someone who knows all of that has taken the stack of your IOU’s and torn them in two, balancing your books in one fell swoop for one reason and one reason alone: because that someone wants to remain in relationship with you, and wants you to be free to respond.”

She continues: “When someone like that has stopped keeping score on you, you feel sort of foolish keeping score on the people in your own life. You feel sort of petty, wanting to write them off after seven times, or even after seventy times seven, for that matter, when you consider how many times you have been forgiven yourself, forgiven from the heart over and over and over again, through no merit of your own but simply because someone loves you very, very much and wants to love you some more. Once you have let that sink in, once you have really taken that into your own heart, how can you - how can any of us (she says) - pass up a single chance to do the same?” (Barbara Brown Taylor, “Once More From the Heart,” *The Seeds of Heaven*, p. 71)

Indeed, how can you and I pass up the chance to do the same?

I can’t help but think about Peter again. How ironic is it that Peter was the one who asked this question about forgiving, and then, it was Peter himself who needed profound forgiveness for denying knowing Christ in the courtyard before Jesus was arrested? Which he got when he encountered the risen Christ on the shore. And when he did, Jesus didn’t berate him, Jesus didn’t bring it back up again, Jesus didn’t question why he had denied knowing him, Jesus just loved him, and challenged him to go and share that forgiving love with others.

And he challenges us, friends, to do the same. So today, when you come to the rail to receive communion, if there is someone whom you’re struggling to forgive, lay that burden down. Remember that you are loved and forgiven beyond your understanding, and ask God to give you what you need to forgive the one who has hurt you.

And even if there is not someone in your life that you need to forgive right

now, pray that you will be Christ-like in all that you say and do, so that those who are hurting will know of His love and forgiveness in their lives.

May you and I, indeed, live as forgiven and reconciled people. May it be so.  
Amen.