

Matthew 18:21-35

I read in a commentary that Peter thought he was really going to be applauded by Jesus when he offered to forgive seven times because it was said that Jewish law only expected a person to forgive three times. How surprised he must have been when Jesus told him not seven, but seventy times seven. Seventy times seven... 490 times.... In the big scheme of things that really isn't a lot, most of us have exhausted that amount before we left our childhood. Jesus is making an understatement when he says seventy times seven. Seven was the last number in their numerical system so seventy times seven would mean an infinite number of times forgiveness is to be granted.

Forgiveness is a difficult concept. There are things that happen to us that we don't want to forgive. Yet we need to remember that forgiveness does more for ourselves than it does for the person whom we forgive. If you can't forgive someone, start praying for them.

The First Reading today from the book of Genesis is the culmination of an important story about forgiveness:

Joseph's brothers were very jealous of him because their father extended privileges to him and treated him far better than they were treated even though he was younger. Joseph didn't help matters when he interpreted a dream to say that in the future his older brothers would be bowing down to him. One day Joseph's father sent him to check on his brothers who were out with the flocks. He was wearing a coat that their father had specially made. The brothers decided they were going to take care of Joseph once and for all. First they thought they would just kill him, but when a caravan of Midianite traders heading to Egypt passed by they decided to sell him to them for twenty shekels of silver, about \$237.00 American dollars today. They took his coat stained with goat blood and gave it to their father telling him Joseph was mauled by wild animals.

The Midianites took Joseph to Egypt where he was purchased by Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh. He was impressed with Joseph's work and gave him privileges. Potiphar's wife was also impressed by Joseph, but not in a good way. She tried to seduce him and when he refused, she falsely accused him of attacking her and Potiphar had him imprisoned. Joseph was imprisoned for about 10 years when Pharaoh had dreams that no one could interpret. The chief cupbearer remembered that Joseph had interpreted his dreams while he was imprisoned and advised Pharaoh of Joseph's ability. Pharaoh wanted someone to interpret his dreams without telling them what they were about. With God's help Joseph discerned the Pharaoh's dreams and interpreted them, but he spent two more years in prison before he was released and made second in charge in Egypt, put in charge of preparing for the coming famine that his dream interpretation had predicted. Under Joseph's charge Egypt had amassed enough grain that not only were their citizens able to have grain, but also, they were able to sell it to people from other countries who traveled to purchase it.

Among those travelers were Joseph's brothers, the ones who had sold him into slavery. Joseph recognized them but they did not know who he was. Joseph tested them in a few ways to determine whether they had changed from those whom he could not trust into men of character. He determined they had changed when he allotted more to Benjamin than to the rest of them and they did not show animosity towards Benjamin, nor did they show any ill feelings toward him.

Had Joseph been anyone but a follower of God he could have greatly overcharged his brothers knowing they would pay anything to keep from starving. Or he could have sent them away without a single grain. But realizing that God had promised a huge nation would evolve through

them Joseph used his blessing to be a blessing to his brothers and forgave them for selling him to the Midianites. He realized that God was using their evil actions to bring about God's plan for them to prosper.

Now, your personal forgiveness may not be such a big deal in God's plan for his people to prosper, yet it is a big deal in God's plan for you to prosper. I'm not saying you will get wealthy when you forgive a person, what I'm saying is that you will be healthier. Think of it this way: Suppose you were to try this experiment when you get home today. Take a trash can lid and lay it on a healthy portion of your lawn. Leave it there for a week. Afterward, lift the lid and look under it. See the pale, sickly grass? See the bugs and worms nesting in the dark decay of the withered grass. That's what sin does to us!

Put the lid back down on the grass. Does the grass have the power to remove the lid all by itself? No. That's impossible. And again, we are like the man in our gospel text with an impossible debt to the king. We are helpless to free ourselves.

Finish the experiment. Take the lid and put it away. The bugs flee. The grass begins to receive sunshine and moisture. Its health is revived, restored. It is literally forgiven, let loose from bondage and decay. Forgiveness is just like that. What we can't pay, God pays. God lets us loose from debts of sin and frees us to new life!

The man in today's gospel was given a great gift, but he was not a great person. He chose to treat a man who owed him money in a way that was not congruent with the way he had been treated. Instead of passing on the mercy and grace he had been given, he threw the man into prison. When the king heard what the man had done, he imprisoned him again. Jesus is saying that forgiveness isn't optional. We pray in the Lord's prayer, "Forgive us our sins as we have forgiven those who sin against us." We put ourselves back into the prison when we decide not to forgive someone. Forgiving doesn't mean that we have to be buddy-buddy with the person, it doesn't mean that we even have to interact with the person. It just means that we let go of the negative emotions that we feel toward the person.

And forgiveness is a process. You may believe you have forgiven someone, then something triggers you, you are back under that garbage can lid, and you must forgive all over again. Someone once betrayed me and hurt me so deeply that it took me years to recover. I truly thought I had recovered, when one day my journey happened to take me past their house and all the old feelings of pain and betrayal, and anger, hit again. It took me by surprise. I hadn't expected that reaction. I knew that I hadn't fully forgiven, so I began the process again. I prayed. I asked God to take away the pain and the negativity. It took a while, but I was at a point of forgiveness again. Until I was sitting in a restaurant having lunch with Bill one Sunday after church and the person walked in. I was horrified. The pain and dislike for this person took over again, but only for a short time. Before we finished our meal, I was able to put the negative feelings behind me. I knew then that I had come to full forgiveness. It wasn't easy. It took a lot of work and time and prayer, but it was worth it knowing that I was at peace with the situation and with God.

I wrestle with the end of the gospel reading, "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart." Aren't we taught that God forgives seventy times seven, an infinite amount of sin, when we believe in Jesus and the grace we have been shown through him? Perhaps that is why it is so important that we forgive, that in doing so we spread the grace freely given to us.

All glory be to God.