

When I was younger, and my little sister and I would get into squabbles over toys or who would play what role in the world we were imagining together, our parents frequently had to remind us to apologize to one another. We all at some point in our development are taught to say “I am sorry,” and as we advance in understanding we learn to name specifically the action for which we must apologize. We learn to recognize that deep feeling in our gut that tells us that we have wronged someone, and we name that feeling guilt. We learn that guilt is a social emotion, which means that seeking someone out and taking responsibility for our bad actions is the only way to begin to quell that deep gut pain.

I vividly remember learning to apologize, and I have gotten a lot of practice over the course of my life. As a small child learning how to be a big sister, a teenager still learning cause and effect, and as a young adult learning how to be independent and in relationship with those I love, I have apologized for offenses great and small. I have been in the wrong literally countless times in my 26 years, and there are still plenty of wrongs I haven’t addressed and plenty more that I may never have the opportunity to make right in this life.

Daily we watch celebrities and politicians and corporations and church leaders issue statements of apology, and there is an entire process within our justice system that allows for those found guilty to confess their crimes and express remorse. To make mistakes, to cause hurt and to perpetuate injustice are inescapable parts of being human in community, and we all need as much instruction and practice as we can get in the art of the genuine apology.

What I don’t recall learning, at least not until very recently, is how to accept forgiveness. I remember hearing my sister being gently corrected when she answered my apologies with “it’s okay,” because it wasn’t. And I remember being taught to say “I accept your apology.” But I don’t think many of us ever explicitly learn what to do when the person we’ve hurt offers us

relief from that awful pain in our gut. We aren't taught how to move forward when we've made our apology and been shown mercy. When we are children, we follow the script until it ends, and then we run off together to start a new activity, the pain of the conflict quickly melting away into memory.

But as we grow and our worlds expand to include more people, so does our capacity to cause harm, and our need for forgiveness swells with it. We cause hurts that go beyond "I'm sorry, it's okay" and even when our apologies are accepted and those we've hurt have offered us forgiveness, it becomes increasingly difficult to heal that wound in our belly that alerts us to injustice and wrongdoing, especially our own. We rarely learn what it looks like to truly accept forgiveness, and because of this we often risk thinking like Peter, looking for an expiration to the forgiveness made available to others.

When we ourselves lose sight of what it feels like to be truly forgiven, when we forget the weight of the debt we carry as sinners, we behave like the unforgiving servant in the parable. The incredible forgiveness and mercy of God that defines who we were made to be slowly becomes just another product to covet, something to hoard for ourselves and dole out only when it benefits us. The mistake that Peter makes is not to estimate too low of a limit. His mistake is assuming there should be a limit at all.

You see, Peter is asking a question on behalf of the followers of Jesus, a question about how they are to live in community with one another and how they are to love one another. Peter's guess, forgiving another member of the church for seven wrongs, would seem incredibly reasonable, generous even. Seven is far higher than three strikes you're out, and that many offenses of one individual against another would definitely be enough for most of us to lose interest in ever speaking with that person again, regardless of how well they apologize.

It is not clear in the text whether Peter means to imply in his example that the same sin has been committed over and over, or rather seven unique instances of offense that threaten the community of believers. Jesus does not seem particularly interested in exploring the nuances of the question, but rather dives deep into the heart of the asker.

Once again, dear Peter embodies for us our own deeply human need to set limits, to create boundaries and to establish thresholds for the relationships that make up our lives. And while it is often necessary to place limits on ourselves and build structures to enable right relationships with one another, it is nothing short of idolatry to attempt to do the same thing on God's behalf. To accept the unbounded and unbridled mercy of God, and still attempt to staunch that flow to our fellow creatures, is to misuse the freedom we have in Christ. Like the unforgiving servant, we become trapped in our own prisons of perfectionism and moral torment when we become misers with the gifts we are freely given. By accepting a scarcity mindset toward our own ability to forgive our siblings in Christ, we fundamentally misunderstand forgiveness.

Our capacity to respond to forgiveness is inextricably linked to our ability to offer it to others. Like children on the playground, we can follow the script of offering and accepting apologies, but true forgiveness so often eludes us. We hold grudges, we keep score, we hold unnamed wrongs against unaware enemies and loved ones alike. We fail to forgive ourselves for the harms we cause, and we label ourselves unworthy of the forgiveness we so crave from God and from others. Sometimes, with some offenses, we run right up against the limits of our human capacity to forgive.

Even Joseph, whose victimization was turned to power and authority, still first misleads and ill-treats the brothers who perpetrated crimes of jealousy against him before finally he

reveals himself to them and offers them shelter and care. The scene we read this morning, this tearful embrace of his vulnerable siblings is not even explicitly a story of forgiveness, as Joseph questions whether it is really his place to offer them the forgiveness that springs from God. Joseph and his brothers have all been wounded by the misdeeds and mistreatment that have passed between them, and it is only through God's own mercy and providence that they are able to reunite and reconcile in safety. Many of us know this from our own experience, how some hurts run so deep within families that they can only be tended to, never fully mended but for the Grace of God and the rolling on of time.

In order to offer forgiveness not seven times, but seventy times seven, in order to build our capacity to forgive one another when wrongs have been committed and remorse has been expressed, we must first understand the sheer magnitude of our own need for forgiveness. This is the importance of the unforgiving servant's debt within the parable. Jesus tells us that this man owes an impossible amount, worth more than his own life and the lives of his family, and still he is given mercy not only to leave the king's service, but even more he is forgiven his debt.

The debt that he owed is the same debt that opens that hole in our chest when we feel the weight of our faults and the ways we have misused the freedom God has given us. That is the weight of our iniquities, the weight of the ways we fall short every moment of God's dream for us through our prejudice and false witness, our idolatrous greed and our desecration of the resources given into our care, our violence of body and of mind. It is a debt that, even if we gave up all that we owned and worked a lifetime in charitable service, even if we became saintly and godly in every respect, we could never repay. Without the strong arms of Jesus to bear us up, we could not stand. And yet, we are forgiven.

Have you ever thought about the miracle of that? When we say the confession together, we confess how we have sinned against God and one another in every possible way, covering every possible wrong with the words “We have not loved you with our whole heart, we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.” And then someone stands up and tells you that God has mercy on you and forgives you all your sins.

A year ago, I said that to you for the first time as a priest, and the magnitude of that absolution changed my life. In every way that you have confessed that you have done wrong, you are forgiven. In every way that you bring your guilt to God, you are absolved. We are not only freed but forgiven, strengthened in goodness and promised eternity. It is not the “I am sorry, it’s okay” of our early days, but “I accept your apology. You are forgiven.” But that is where the script ends.

That is where our wisdom leaves us, and we look to Jesus for a response. Forgive your brother and your sister from your heart. To be human is to be in constant need of forgiveness. To be alive in Christ is to look for opportunities to forgive. The response to the lifting of this indescribable weight is to lighten the load that falls on our neighbor. Unlike the unforgiving servant, we must forgive our debtors with the same abundant mercy that has raised us from death into life. Unlike Peter, we must not ask when it is enough. Nothing short of God’s own love is enough.