

²¹Then 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?" ²²Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. ²³"For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; ²⁵and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. ²⁶So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' ²⁷And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' ²⁹Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' ³⁰But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. ³¹When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. ³²Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' ³⁴And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. ³⁵So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

One day this past week, my twins were still in their pajamas, sitting at the kitchen table and awaiting the breakfast that I was preparing. All was going normally, when suddenly Virginia blurted out, "Daddy! Five and five make ten!" Now, she's three years old... so I looked up surprisingly, told her she was correct, and then I asked her how she knew that. With a big smile on her face, she held up two hands of five fingers and then started counting those fingers. Low and behold, she reached ten again. So I asked her what four and four make. She hid her thumbs, did the same

process again, then shouted, “Eight!” We continued with the various finger combinations that can be made on two hands, and each time she was right. I have to admit that I’m proud of her achievement of quantifying fingers.

The disciple Peter appears to have been into quantifying things as well. Last week we heard Jesus teach his disciples that Christians are to forgive one another and work toward reconciliation as a community of faith. Our gospel lesson today picks up where things left off with Peter asking, “Okay, but how many times do I have to forgive? As many as seven?” I hear the man. Seven is a good number to toss out there to start a discussion. It’s large enough to not seem stingy. We can keep track of seven pretty easily. It’s even ritually symbolic in the Jewish tradition. Peter may have been thinking that’s the right answer, or he may have expected Jesus to reply with, “Seven? No, me have mercy, no -- that is way too many times to forgive someone!” That’s not how Jesus replies, however. The Greek can be translated two different ways, but Jesus’ answer is either seventy-seven or seventy-times-seven. Whichever one it is, my daughter Virginia and Peter the disciple would lose track before ever reaching the threshold of quantifiable forgiveness.

Jesus is teaching Peter -- and us -- that forgiveness doesn’t belong in that category of things that are countable. He launches into a parable to prove his point. Like many parables, this one has some narrative extremes in order to drive a point home. There is a servant who owes his master 10,000 talents. That is a big number, but I can imagine a number one with four zeros behind it. What I can’t imagine, however, is that in Jesus’ time, to pay off that debt it would require a laborer to work seven days a week for 150,000 years, putting every cent earned into repayment. That is the amount of debt that small nations carry. So clearly this is hyperbole. The point of

using it, however, is not to highlight how much this servant owes, but to shine light on the vast and deep willingness of God to forgive. Yet this servant then approaches another servant who owes him the equivalent of 100 days of labor. That's a sizable amount, but it is a pittance compared to what the first servant was just forgiven. He was offered forgiveness beyond imagination, yet he couldn't show some mercy to his fellow servant. We aren't told why he wouldn't forgive his fellow servant. Perhaps that is a good thing, because we are supposed to see ourselves as the first servant whenever we are in a situation where we don't want to forgive.

The parable ends with a warning that the servant will undergo torture until he is able to forgive. It was a common literary practice to issue warnings like this at the end of parables. It serves time and again as a reminder that recipients of God's gifts are supposed to share them with others. Truth be told, we aren't supposed to take literally the hyperbole of this torture any more than we would take literally the hyperbole of a common laborer racking up the debt equivalent to a nation's. There still is, however, truth in the ending of this parable: holding a grudge can eat at us. In some instances, withholding forgiveness is torturous for us. The parable's entire point is that as we have been forgiven by God, we ought to be forgiving of others.

Yet, we must acknowledge that there are major differences in the things we are called to forgive. The harm that is done is one difference: the harm can range from minimal to extensive. There is also the intention behind the act that is another spectrum to consider. On one end of the spectrum is a one-time accidental offense and on the other end is recurrent abusive behavior. So the idea of forgiveness can be messy and complex when lived out in real, human scenarios. Therefore, the ability to forgive does not always come easily. Sometimes forgiveness in one scenario will look

different than forgiveness in another scenario. Even the necessary reconciliation after forgiveness will also look different between different scenarios. Sometimes distance is still necessary even after forgiveness is given, and sometimes a form of punishment is still warranted. Some offenses are so awful and some “debts” are so huge that the idea of forgiving and reconciling is nearly impossible to comprehend. Even in those complex circumstances, it is still important to strive to forgive, even if it takes time and help with professionals. In cases like that, forgiveness is not forgetting; forgiveness is not letting bygones be bygones. Forgiveness is being liberated from the power the offense has over you. Forgiveness is no longer allowing that offense to define who you are.

When Peter asks how many times he should forgive, Jesus responds with seventy-seven, or seventy-times-seven. Hidden in that exchange is the acknowledgement Jesus makes that forgiveness can take a long time, and that forgiveness can be a difficult process. The good news is that when God calls us to the task of forgiveness, God equips us for it as well. We are equipped with the one who -- on the night he was betrayed and abandoned by members of his closest circle -- shared bread and wine with them, given to them and to all people for the forgiveness of sins. Through Jesus, we come to know the incomprehensible forgiveness God is capable of sharing with us, and we share that same gift with others. The Rev. Dr. Kathryn Schifferdecker writes, “[In sharing forgiveness with others,] God opens doors that are shut. God opens a future that is shut. By forgiving those who have sinned against us, we do not allow the past to dictate our future. Forgiveness breaks the chains of anger and bitterness and frees us to live new lives.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.