

Texts: Genesis 50:15-21; Psalm 103:1-13; Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35

So how many is it? Once again Peter blurts out a question to Jesus. But it's a question that we all want the answer to, so it's good that Peter had the courage to bring it up. How many times do I have to forgive someone close to me who has sinned against me? It is as many as 7 times?

This really is the question, isn't it? There are lots of Christians who think of the Bible as a book of instructions, so they just want to find the one verse that will answer today's question. What are we supposed to DO, Jesus? Give us an answer that we can quantify.

Jesus doesn't play that game. That's why he gives Peter a ridiculous answer. "Not 7 times, but 77 times." Some translations of the Greek read "70 times 7" – that would be forgiving someone 490 times. But the point that Jesus goes on to make is this: It's not about the numbers.

And in order to understand that it's not about the numbers, we need to look at the numbers that Jesus talks about in his parable.

A slave owes his king 10,000 talents. A talent in first century Palestine was the equivalent of 15 years' worth of labor. So 10,000 talents equals 150,000 years' worth of income. It's an absurdly huge amount, and the people who originally heard this parable would have laughed out loud at the impossibility of anyone actually racking up that kind of debt. Imagine all the student loan debt in this country. Imagine all the mortgage debt. Of course the slave can't pay it off, and when he begs for mercy, the king actually forgives this ludicrous amount.

But then the slave himself is approached by someone who owes him 100 denarii. One denarius was worth a day's wage, so 100 denarii equals a little over 3 months' worth of income. It's not an insignificant sum, but it is miniscule when compared with how much the king has forgiven. But the forgiven slave refuses to turn and offer similar forgiveness to the one who owes him. He refuses to extend the mercy outward.

If you think, like Peter does, that faith is about what we are supposed to DO, that faith is about keeping track and keeping score, then you have missed the point. Because once again, Jesus introduces his parable with these words: "The kingdom of heaven is like..." Jesus invites his listeners into a whole new way of living. Forgiveness is no longer something we DO to rack up points to get into heaven. Forgiveness becomes who we ARE. God's forgiveness is outlandishly huge. It is infinite and universal. But God's forgiveness does not begin to do its work in us if we do not receive it and then pay it out in the same way.

In the Psalm we read this morning, God is described this way: gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. It's a description of God that is found all over the Old Testament, beginning in the book of Exodus when God uses those words to describe God's self to Moses. Gracious and merciful. Slow to anger. Abounding in steadfast love. Can those attributes be quantified?

Think of it this way: if Peter had asked Jesus how many times he should love his neighbor, we would understand how misguided his question is. Love can't be counted. Grace can't be counted. Mercy can't be counted. Forgiveness is the same way. It's not how many times you do it. It's how you live it.

Every single Sunday, we enter into worship by confessing how it is that we have fallen short and missed the mark of living as God would have us live. And then we ask God to forgive us. And when I speak those words to you – “Your sins are forgiven,” I am speaking God’s own words, and they are real and true. You are forgiven.

Every single Sunday, we pray the prayer that Jesus taught us, the one that includes a petition to God to forgive us as we forgive others. We acknowledge that to live in God’s forgiveness means that we must in turn extend that forgiveness to those who have wronged us.

God offers us forgiveness in Jesus Christ. Jesus’ life was filled with forgiveness. As he healed people who were sick, he told them that their sins were forgiven. His life was filled with forgiveness. He lived his life proving that God’s love is greater than our sin – infinitely greater. As Jesus died on the cross, he asked forgiveness for the people who killed him – the religious leaders who organized against him and the soldiers who nailed him to the cross and the crowds who watched and taunted him. No one asked for forgiveness and yet forgiveness was given. In that final act of his life, Jesus opened up a sphere of forgiveness into which anyone can walk. He opened up a sphere of relationship that sets us free, lifts the weight, and opens the door to a whole new way of living.

There’s one last detail in Jesus’ parable: when the king learns that the slave has not extended mercy outward, he hands him over to be tortured. But I think that torture was self-inflicted. By not reflecting the mercy that he had received, the slave sentenced himself to torture. We know what that torture is like. It’s the torture of living a life where you are always calculating how much you can get away with. It’s the torture of living a life where love is a commodity that you parcel out. It’s the torture of living a life where all you do is

keep score. It's the torture of zero-sum game thinking where if someone else gets more forgiveness, then you get less.

No one says that forgiveness is easy. No one says that forgiving also means forgetting. And let me be clear – there are some wrongs which are so huge and horrifying that forgiveness seems almost impossible. Forgiving does not mean that someone who has been abused should return to life with an abuser. Forgiving does not mean that criminals should not be held accountable for their crimes. Forgiving does not take away the need for restitution. Forgiving does not negate the act of taking responsibility.

What forgiving does is to allow you to open your clenched fist and receive the gift that God offers – the gift of mercy, the gift of blessing, the gift of redemption, the gift of a restored relationship. When we know ourselves to be the recipients of an impossible, outlandishly huge amount of forgiveness, we are called to share it. The more forgiveness we receive, the more we are able to turn and forgive one another. It's a circle that goes around and around.

Forgive 77 times, Jesus said. Or maybe he said 70 times 7. It's not about the numbers. It's about life in the kingdom of heaven. Abundant forgiveness leads to abundant life.