

**Sermon for Sunday, September 17, 2017**  
**St James Episcopal Church, St James NY**  
**The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley**

“Then 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?’ Jesus said to him, ‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.’”

If you’ve been around church for a while, you’ve probably heard more times than you can count that we should forgive one another.

We hear it in our bible readings. We say it every time that we pray the Lord’s prayer. It’s something that we all know that we’re supposed to do.

But knowing it  
and doing it  
are two different things.

Because, to be honest, being told that we should forgive other people is kind of like telling us we should fly.  
It sounds great  
but it’s almost impossible to do.  
In the case of flying,  
it’s because of physical constraints.  
In the case of forgiving  
it’s because of emotional constraints.

When someone hurts us, whether it’s physically, with words, with actions, or whatever, it’s something that affects us in all sorts of ways. And in the middle of the mess is how we feel.  
We feel pain. We feel anger.  
We feel grief.  
We feel ashamed, defeated, defective, betrayed,  
unvalued, uncared for  
and a whole host of other things.  
And then, added on top of it all,  
when the bible or the church or someone else  
tells us we should forgive the person who hurt us

we feel guilty.

Because it's just too hard. All that other stuff gets in the way. We just can't do it.

So then. What do we do with a reading like today's?

Are we doomed to always feeling guilty? Do we risk God not forgiving us because we have trouble forgiving other people?

Maybe we need to take another look at Jesus's parable that we read today.

Most of the time we read it like this.

Once there was a really king

who decided it was time to call in his debts. One of his servants owed an enormous amount, and couldn't pay up, and begged for more time.

So the king, being in a good mood, instead of throwing him in debtor's prison, let him off.

And then the servant went to one of his co-workers, who owed him a few dollars, demanded his money. The other servant couldn't pay up, so the first one had him thrown in prison.

Next thing, the king heard about it all, and was shocked. After all his generosity, this servant had been mean and stingy. So the king had him tortured.

And what this boils down to, in terms of forgiveness,

is that God will forgive us — with conditions. Only as long as we forgive other people, effectively paying God back for the forgiveness we get. So you'd better get forgiving or else.

Nice story.

But is this really what the parable about? If you look at the details there are maybe other ways to think about it. Some that aren't so dependent on paying God back.

Let's begin when the king asked his servant

to pay the money he owed. Ten thousand talents — that's about equivalent to a day laborer's wages

for 150,000 years! There was no way on earth, no way at all that this guy could pay it back.

The king knew it; the servant knew it.

And as far as the law was concerned

the king was entitled  
to take the debtor  
and his family  
and do whatever he wanted with them. They had no rights at all.  
So the servant went  
and begged the king,  
“Just give me a chance, a bit more time, and I’ll pay you back everything.”  
The king knew it was impossible,  
and instead of keeping the servant in debt, he said, “It’s okay. I’ll forgive you the debt.”  
As simply as that.

But the servant  
didn’t get it. He didn’t get that he had been forgiven. He didn’t get that the king had  
given him the chance at a new life. There was no rejoicing, no gratitude, no celebration.  
He acted as if nothing had happened, nothing at all.

He turned right around, headed out and went after one of his fellow servants who owed  
him a pittance, just a minuscule proportion of what he had once owed. And when that  
servant couldn’t pay up, even though he too begged for mercy, the first servant just had  
him thrown into prison.

No wonder that there was scandal in the community, no wonder the other servants went  
to the king and complained. And as a result, the first servant’s debt  
suddenly reappeared;  
he was thrown into prison and tortured.

What’s different about these two ways of reading the story  
is that in the first one  
it’s all about payment, quid pro quo, a favor for a favor. If I do this then you’ll be  
obligated to do that.

In the second one, it’s about generosity and mercy. The king  
went far beyond what was just, far beyond what was fair. He didn’t just give the first  
servant extra time, he cancelled the debt outright!

But he expected his generosity  
to make a difference in that first servant’s life. The king was inviting the first servant  
to make a new beginning, to start life again  
free from the burdens that had oppressed him.  
He didn’t expect him

just to go on as before  
as if nothing had ever happened.  
At the very least, he must have expected celebrations, rejoicing gratitude.  
Instead, the first servant turned around  
and destroyed someone else's life.  
The king must have felt  
like he was being slapped in the face. He might as well  
not have bothered.

So where does this leave us?  
It's pretty obvious  
that the king is intended to represent God. And equally obvious  
that the first servant represents us, or at least, us as we can be inclined to behave.  
Here we are, human beings, constantly making messes in our lives, big and small, and  
there is God  
constantly forgiving us.  
It's tempting to say to God, "please forgive me just this once, and I'll make it up to you,  
I'll try to be better."

But if Jesus is right, then what God wants to hear  
is not, "I'll pay you back by being good"  
but "thank you for the chance  
to begin again."

And the point of Jesus recommending that we forgive seventy-seven times  
is not because our forgiveness from God is somehow dependent on how many times we  
forgive  
but because if we really take the chance God gives us, and keeps giving us  
to begin life again  
then we'll begin to live differently.  
We've received such a wonderful gift from God  
we'll want to pass it on.  
to pass it forward.

**BUT.**

But, even when we are forgiven, even when we are grateful,  
forgiveness is tough. We're human.  
And even when we try to forgive  
we often get caught up in all the anger and betrayal and grief and so on  
that goes with being hurt.

So what do we do? Really.

Sometimes we need to get professional help. As a priest, I'm always happy to listen to and talk with people, but I'm not a professionally trained counselor. There are times when the hurts run deep, and they keep shaping how we think and feel and act even when we aren't aware of it.

Sometimes we need to see a professional therapist, to help us deal with all that stuff. I will be forever thankful for the people who pushed me to see someone after my parents divorced. I felt betrayed and angry and hurt, and it took that professional help to move through those feelings to a point when I was able to begin life again, and to forgive my parents. If that hadn't happened, I'd probably still be caught up in that anger. Professional help can be essential to us living as healthy people and grace filled Christians.

But we can't just palm it all off onto professionals. We need to do our own work too. I also think, in my experience, that it's a whole lot easier to forgive other people when we've made a habit of it.

It's like any other habit, it's easier to do if you've been doing it a while.

What happens often

is that we get into bad habits — a whole bunch of them. And one bad habit is holding onto grudges. Someone hurts us in some way.

Time passes. We might talk to them about it, we might not. They might even apologize. But we hold onto the hurt, nursing it, keeping it alive. Kind of like picking at the scab on a grazed knee, so that it never really heals properly. Until eventually, where it might have just been a small graze, you end up with a big scar, much bigger than the original injury. We do it when people hurt us. We hold on tightly, and it makes a bigger and bigger and uglier scar, out of proportion to the original injury. And then we make a habit of it, so that we end up carrying more and more grudges around, and more and more of our hearts are covered with scars. And then when something really big and bad happens, it's just so much worse.

But holding grudges

is not the only habit we can get into.

We can also get into the habit of forgiving, of forgiving the small stuff.

It's not about denying that they hurt us. It's deciding that if we hold onto them, they'll keep on hurting us and they'll make scars that get in the way of the good things,

and so we want to let them go.

To say, I won't let these hurts have power over me, I won't let them control my life. To say to God,

help me, please help me,  
to let go of this.

Please don't let it have power over me.

It's not about denying what has happened  
but of refusing to let it control us.

It's making a habit  
of forgiveness.

And if we make a habit, a practice  
of forgiving

then maybe when the big hurts, those almost imaginable acts of injury and betrayal,  
maybe they won't

have quite the power over us  
that we expected.

Forgiving them

might be the work of a lifetime,

as we try to deal with the anger and pain and grief, the feelings of being ashamed and  
defeated and defective, betrayed and unvalued and uncared for.

But it is work  
that will come

out of the grace that is already present in our lives,  
the grace that we've been living day by day, the grace  
that comes

from God's forgiveness of us.

We are forgiven. Whether we deserve it or not. That's irrelevant. God has forgiven us, no strings attached, and invites us to begin life again. So be thankful, celebrate, live in grace.

And forgive one another, just as God has  
forgiven us.

Amen.