

Forgiving 77 Times

Well, today is 9/11. With all the news coverage and special stories these last few weeks, we've all been reliving that horrible day 10 years ago. It's still really hard isn't it? It's hard to watch such evil and destruction and terror. Hard to have all those feelings tear through us again; making us sick and sad and so angry. So we all come to church today, and what do we hear? A bunch of bible verses about *forgiveness*: 'How often should I forgive? As many as seven times?' 'Not seven times,' Jesus said, 'but seventy seven.' Boy, that's tough to hear today of all days. And it's worse, because Jesus doesn't stop there—he warns us that God will *hand you over to be tortured, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart*. It makes me wonder if I should've changed the readings for today's service. Because today, how can we possibly begin to forgive such a ghastly atrocity? How can we really forgive the ones who hurt us? The ones who have no remorse? Who are *still* threatening to hurt us? I might have changed the readings today, except for one thing. These texts, they're not really about forgiving something like the 9/11 attacks. Listen again to Peter's question:

"Lord, if another member of the church sins against me,
how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?"

Another member of the church. We've actually walked into the *middle* of a conversation here between Jesus and the disciples. They're talking about all the new followers of Jesus; about the new growing community of Christians. We didn't hear it today, but this whole conversation sounds like the world's oldest church council meeting. It's like they're setting up bylaws; rules about how they should all act—how they should treat one another within the church. That's why this Gospel reading is paired with that sort of strange Second Reading we got today; where St. Paul tells the Romans,

Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables...

Uh-huh. What's *that* all about?

Well, it's about the formation of the early Christian church in Rome. There was some fighting and contention going on between the new members. Because some were Jews, and some were Gentiles. So they had different food practices, and different holy days; different ways of doing things. So they argued. They fought over how to live out their Christianity faithfully—*Hey, you shouldn't eat meat... Yeah?... Well, you shouldn't worship on Saturdays*. They fought over the 'right way' to be Christians. And people got offended and angry. And treated each other badly. I suppose it's not too different

today. Look at all the fighting between fundamentalists and progressive Christians.

The fundamentalists—the bible-quoters who try to read scripture literally—well, progressives are quick to call them narrow-minded, intolerant, weak in understanding. And the fundamentalists, they call those liberal progressives immoral, permissive, heathen and weak in righteousness. And it can get pretty nasty. And somehow Christ gets forgotten in the fray. And we treat each other badly. Even in churches of like-minded people, the gospel gets overshadowed by arguments over the details. Should kids stay in worship? Should we use a high altar or a communion table? Just how lavish should our Lenten lunches be? Like Paul said, *Some believe in eating anything...While the weak eat only vegetables.*

Eat, don't eat...Who cares? It all seems so petty. To get angry and hold grudges over the small things. It all seems so petty on a day like today, on 9/11. But *it is* what we do 364 other days a year. And I don't mean just church stuff—but out there in the rest of our lives. We get petty and intolerant of others. We make hasty judgments all the time. Especially about people who do things differently. We make unkind judgments about the way people look, or dress, or talk, or act. Judgments about their morality or character. We do it all the time in our hearts, we do. And we can get pretty unforgiving as well. We hold grudges. We have a hard time pardoning even small betrayals and petty sins against us. We hang on to resentments. Against co-workers, and fellow church-goers, and even against our own families. Sometimes we hold onto grudges for years. We let jealousy, envy, and pride guide us. And we treat each. We hurt people with our angry silences. With our dirty looks and our eye-rolling. We hurt people with our sarcasm. And the cross words we whisper under our breath. Even us good church-going Christian folk—we are guilty of rudeness and small cruelties, all the time. And we do not forgive the things we can. The sad thing is, hanging on to our hurts harms *us* more than anyone else. Grudges are toxic. They make us sick and sad and so angry.

You know, in today's Gospel, the Greek word we translate as 'forgive'—it's *aphiemi*. And *aphiemi* literally means, 'to let go' ; 'to send away.' When we hold in a grudge, it tears at us. If we don't let go of it and forgive, it will torture us—like it tortured the unforgiving slave in Jesus' parable. Let's talk about that parable:

The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, 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. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything. Okay, 10,000 talents. Can anybody venture a guess how much that is in U.S. dollars? Actually, it's a ridiculous, massive number. One talent is equal to about 20 years worth of daily wages. So 10,000

talents, that's like 25 billion dollars. *Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything?!?!*

Yeah right. This guy could *never* pay that sum back. Ever! So, did the king throw him in prison, and sell his family into slavery? No. The king forgave him, and set him free. *Phew*. Now, you'd *think* he'd be all full of gratitude, right? Well if he is, he doesn't show it:

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.' Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt.

100 denarii. Any guesses what that's worth? Not that much. One denarius is equal to one day's wages. The second slave could have worked off the debt in 100 days. The second slave's debt was 1/160,000th of the first slave's debt! He could *easily* have forgiven that debt. He should have—especially knowing what a tremendous gift of grace he'd been granted by the king. And *that*, right there—*that's* the heart of forgiveness: Thankfulness. Gratitude. Knowing that we have been blessed. That's where any and all forgiveness starts: knowing that have been forgiven an unpayable debt—the terrible debt of *our* sin. We have been forgiven and set free. We have been given eternal life through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ—and *not* because we deserve it. How can we condemn another, when we are so deeply indebted? How can we be unmerciful when we've been granted such incredible grace?

I want to be clear about something, especially today. Forgiveness is not about us absolving people of their evil deeds. It's not about allowing others to harm us, or walk all over us, or abuse us. It's not. Forgiveness *is* about shifting our focus from what we've lost to all that we've been given. It's about remembering God's amazing grace to us—and letting *that* heal us. It's about making God's grace the guiding principle of our lives.

Peter asked, "How often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."

There's a little numerology going on there. 7 is a very special number in Hebrew thought. 7 is the number of perfection—of infinite possibility and limitlessness. How often and what should we forgive? Ultimately, always. Everything—the way God forgives us when we repent.

Jesus is saying that forgiveness has no upper limit—not even the 9/11 attacks on us. Maybe today we're not ready to forgive such a thing. God knows we're probably not. So let's start, not with 10,000 talents, but with 100 denarii. Let's start letting go of the things we can. Let's start by remembering we are people of God; by remembering—every day—that we are forgiven, redeemed, and so very blessed by grace. Getting past the petty stuff to what really matters—it's not easy. Because it's *not* second

nature to us. Forgiveness is not our first emotional response; it takes practice. So, let's start practicing. We can start by waking up every day and thanking God for his grace. And then end every day by confessing the ways we failed to be merciful that day. And then give thanks once again for grace. We've got to find ways to remember God's grace. Every day. Because *that's* when we'll begin to understand the depths of mercy. That's when forgiveness really starts in us. And we'll stop treating each other badly. And our hurts, they will heal too.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.