

Someone asks a question. Jesus tells a story. It's a familiar pattern. Today it's Peter asking the question – how many times shall I forgive? Seven? Peter is being generous. Jewish law said you only have to forgive three times. Jesus responds no - seventy times seven which could also be interpreted seventy seven. It doesn't matter which it is. Have you even tried to keep track of how many times you have forgiven someone? Even seventy seven would require some serious record keeping. Jesus is telling us to forgive and to forgive a lot.

I always worry about preaching forgiveness, because I have come across so many understandings of forgiveness that have been used to hurt people and keep them in abusive relationships. This is what forgiveness is not. Bishop of Washington, Mariann Budde writes "Forgiveness is not the same as forgetting, as if the offense never occurred or has no lasting consequence. We know it doesn't work that way. Forgiveness is not some kind of erasure, nor would we want it to be. Think of all the hard won learning we would lose if we forgot what we needed to forgive. Even when forgiven, living with the consequences of our deeds is costly. About our abuse of the environment, Pope Francis warns, "God always forgives; Nature cannot."<sup>1</sup>

But then, what is forgiveness? Forgiveness is complex. Books and books have been written about forgiveness, but these three parts I mentioned do give us food for thought. And like anything that is complex, it takes attention and practice. During our Tuesday evening worship discussion, one participant described a friend who forgives easily. Her friend says – "What does it matter in the light of eternity?" and is able to let things go. I suspect that her being a forgiving person took attention to forgiveness and practice. Practicing it for the small things will help with the big things. Practicing forgiving the person who cut you off and the person who never returned your phone call will prepare you for the bigger wrongs that happen to you.

Let's turn to the story that Jesus tells to see what we can learn. It starts out with a king's servant who owes the king quite a lot of money – 10,000 talents – let's say 100,000 dollars. That's a lot of money. The king is about to sell the servant, his family and all his possessions to pay for the debt. The servant pleads with him and the master forgives him the whole debt. Unbelievable! Then the servant goes out into the market place and sees another servant who owes him 100 denarii – let's call it \$10. This person pleads with him and rather than forgiving him the debt, the first servant throws him into jail until he can pay. How quickly he has forgotten the mercy given to him. It doesn't end there. Others who see what has happened report his doings to the king, who then calls him in, tells him how ungrateful he is and throws him into jail. The servant has ruined the gift he was given.

There are three things I observed in the story that gave me some insight into forgiveness.

One is that the story is around money. That's one of the most challenging things to forgive in this world. How many families have been torn apart because some one has kept an inheritance or stolen money? Forgiveness around money is hard and perhaps that's why Jesus

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.edow.org/about/bishop-mariann/writings/2020/09/10/forgiveness>

uses it in this story. In college, I remember struggling if I lent \$10 to a friend and they forgot to pay it back. It would bother me and I had trouble letting it go. True it was about 3 and ½ hours of work for me back in my work study days when I made \$3.35 an hour, but in the grand scheme of things was it worth me spending so much mental energy on it? I would tell myself – just let it go – it is only \$10 with not much success. But isn't that often the case when we aren't able to forgive whether it be about money or some other issue? It can eat away at us. Forgiveness is not an easy practice. It can challenge us to the nth degree.

The second thing I noticed was the amounts of money in the story. One hundred thousand dollars vs. ten dollars. How could the servant be worried about ten dollars when he had just been forgiven one hundred thousand? Was he having memory problems? But then how true is that of us the people of God who have had God's mercy poured down on us time after time, and who live coming before God and confessing our sins every day knowing that they are forgiven. We too forget about God's amazing grace and have trouble extending just a fraction of that grace to others.

Finally, the third aspect of the story that caught my attention was what the servant said to the king when he was pleading with him. He doesn't say have mercy on me or forgive me. He says have patience with me. I looked in many translations at the Greek word used for patience wondering if it had another meaning but over and over it is translated patience. The only translation that was different said, give me a chance. What I hear when the servant says "have patience with me" is "give me some time." That's an interesting perspective on forgiveness. When I think of forgiveness, I often think about it being on demand although it usually doesn't work that way. Asking for patience to me indicated a longer timeline, which is often needed for forgiveness work. Have patience. I'm working on it. Can you work on it too? I suspect patience is a huge factor in forgiveness.

These three aspects only tell part of the story what forgiveness is. As I said before, forgiveness is complex. But if we take the time this week to see how we can bring these three aspects to how we can give, what will that be like? Can we be attentive to forgiving? Will we practice forgiveness with the smaller things? Remember as our parishioner's friend says – what does it matter in the light of eternity?

So forgive not just seven times, but seventy times seven. Acknowledge that it is not easy and involves issues that are not easily let go of like money. Remember the endless forgiveness and grace God that pours upon us and see how some part of that can flow from you to others. Be patient. Be patient with others and yourselves in this process because the journey can be long especially in certain cases.

If we can spread that same gift that God gives us, then this world will be a gentler and more loving place – a little closer to the kingdom of God.