

We have a cat named Miles. Miles is a resplendent creature full of grace and truth. I love him. And at times, I think he loves me. Having a cat can teach you lessons, lessons about affection, about the need to take an occasional nap, about the ability to take pleasure in simple things...like a string or an empty box. But perhaps the most important thing I've learned from my cat is that it is possible to feel to contrary emotions at the same time. When I pick my cat up, he protests with an annoyed meow...but soon after I start scratching his neck he begins to purr...pure purrs of joy...then he meows in annoyance again and immediately returns to purring...the cycle continues until I put him down and he immediately rubs on my legs and purrs some more...but if I try to pet him again...he often runs away with the a look of pure revulsion. He wants to be petted, enjoys it...and he doesn't....at the same time.

I say all of this because as humans our emotional and intellectual lives are just as complicated as those of the feline variety...perhaps more so. We aspire to hold ideals....at the same time that we momentarily hold conflicting opinions. We love people who annoy us. We want to change while, at the same time, idealizing stability and the comfort it offers. We want to love our neighbors and our enemies, and we do in fact love them, while at the same time we are angry at them for unjust and unkind actions. We try to forgive, while nursing grudges.

I say all of this knowing full well that we also desire to be wholly consistent. We want our lives to be pure, we want to forgive and we can assume that forgiveness must mean that we lose anger, lose hurt, lose the desire for recompense or just punishment. This morning, I want to question this assumption with you.

In our gospel reading from Mathew, Peter asks Jesus about forgiveness. “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.

Now, if we are honest...honest and real and forthright...don't you sometimes read things like this and say “this is impossible” Do you ever hear things like this and wonder about how this would play out in th? This week as I read this lesson my mind wandered to those situations that seem unforgivable...situations of real abuse, situations of wicked and corrupt greed. Situations that leave people permanently scarred and permanently carrying emotional damage. Really, 77 times for Putin, 77 times for Pol Pot or Idi Amin...77 times for the serial abuser...It all seems impossible.

Further, for people who are seriously injured and wounded by the callous and evil actions of others, This standard seems downright injurious. What if the scars they carry still hurt? What if the weight of feeling like they have to forgive weighs them down even more....adding insult to injury, what if on top of the pain...they also experience further emotional trauma for not feeling the feelings we associate with forgiveness.

Back to my cat and feeling two things at once. I want to be clear about the nature of biblical forgiveness, because I think this is key to understanding Jesus's teaching about continuously forgiving. We often experience and talk and think about forgiveness as a change of affect...or emotion....thinking If I forgive someone, then it must mean that I'm no longer angry at them or

even no longer hurt. It must mean that I feel differently about them after forgiving them. But I think forgiveness is much more than that...more complicated, more nuanced.

Let me be as clear as my cat. It is possible to forgive someone and still be angry at them. It is ok to forgive someone and still hope that justice prevails. It is possible, and even preferable, for forgiveness and justice to hold hands....in the biblical framework, forgiveness doesn't mean that you are miraculously free of the results of someone else's terrible actions. It doesn't mean that you no longer feel sadness and hurt, pain or betrayal. What it means, is that you've decided, with the help and guiding of the Holy Spirit, to remember that these feelings are important, valid, truth-telling...but don't tell the whole story.

Forgiveness is the stubborn and yet sometimes meek preference for the messy reality of grace. Grace it seems, is almost always offered in a way that is tainted by the beautiful yet broken nature of this life we live.

Grace, for instance, asks us to assert the hard truth that the person whom you forgive, is more than the sum of their misdeeds. You remember that culture and history and hurt have formed them and their decisions. You remember that hurt people, hurt people. You acknowledge your own hurt, your own pain, while also acknowledging the complexity of the world.

Forgiveness means that you have foregone revenge and retribution, while holding out hope for justice. Forgiveness means that you prefer restoration over retribution...but forgiveness also acknowledges that full restoration is a two way street, demanding honesty and contrition...and if you are the victim, then these are things you can't control. This means that forgiveness and amnesty are two different things....you can forgive those who are not contrite... you can forgive

the person who isn't apologetic....and you can also remain angry with them without sinning...remain eager for justice without giving way to revenge. Forgiveness requires the

We often think of concepts discreetly...imagining them to have concrete lines that separate them from other concepts. Love is love. Forgiveness is forgiveness. Etc. But in real life, and in real people...these lines are often blurred...and I guess what I'm trying to say is that these blurred lines are ok. When Jesus tells Peter to forgive 77 times...he isn't telling Peter to forget about the 77 transgressions...he doesn't tell Peter that he can't be angry about the 77 transgressions...who wouldn't be? Instead, He's encouraging Peter to look at a larger picture...he's reminding Peter that love makes demands of us....even and often demands that require continual and iterative sacrifice. He's reminding Peter that he has been forgiven...and that he will need forgiveness again in the future. He's letting Peter know that Forgiveness can sometimes have a touch of grief to it. He's preparing Peter for real life.

The bottom line is that forgiveness is not a feeling we finally manage to achieve. It is a way we choose to live. You may still be angry. You may still carry the scar, still long for justice, still know that reconciliation is not possible. And you can forgive. Because forgiveness is the choice to refuse to let another person's sin determine who you will become.

And maybe that is why Jesus says seventy-seven times. Because sometimes we forgive, and then wake up the next morning and discover that we have to choose it again. We remember the hurt, and choose grace again. We feel the anger, and choose not to seek revenge.

Seventy-seven times. Not because the wound isn't real or justice doesn't matter, but because forgiveness is something we practice until, little by little, grace has more power over us than the wound does. Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespassed against us. Amen.