

*Peter came and said to Jesus, "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. For this reason 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.' And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But 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. When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart." - Matthew 18:21-35*

An episode of a TV drama that I recently watched involved two men between whom the inklings of a friendship had begun to develop through their work as doctors. Then one night, due to a tragic misunderstanding, one man flew into a rage and assaulted the other. The victim was rushed to the hospital. In the operating room, the surgeons wondered aloud if these injuries will end the man's career. The assailant was soon after charged with a felony. His career was now in peril as well.

Weeks later, the victim is healing promisingly. A third doctor encounters the victim in an elevator on his first day back at work. She tries to establish a rapport. "You know, I was attacked, too ..." And then, "I didn't want to forgive the guy ... but I did because I needed to."

Some of us know what that's like. We don't want to forgive, but at some point we realize that we need to forgive for the sake of our own sanity and freedom.

But that wasn't the most telling moment in the dialog for me. The doctor in the elevator who initiated contact with the recent victim began to build a case for reconciling with the assailant. She was stopped cold by the victim, who simply said, "Well, I'm – I'm not ready for that." That one line lingered with me. We also know what it's like to be there: "I'm not ready for that." I'm not ready to forgive.

Forgiveness often seems to me, and may seem to some of you, like the Mt. Everest of the spiritual life – a realm for seasoned climbers only, the remarkable saints who alone are able to genuinely attain the heights of what Jesus, at the end of today's teaching, calls 'forgiveness from your heart.' The rest of us are left to look on with awe or envy, imagining the climb is out of our league and resigning ourselves to being forgiveness amateurs, a lifetime of good intentions that can do more harm than good.

As much as we may wish to opt out, all of us who purport to follow Jesus are meant to make the climb – to outfit ourselves however we must, to train sincerely, to learn from mistakes and to set our sights high.

Forgiveness can take time. In instances where we've been assaulted in body, mind or spirit and have sustained profound injuries, genuine forgiveness, even for a willing and devoted practitioner, may take time, sometimes years. Maybe the victim in the drama I saw was not being stubborn when he said, "*I'm not ready ...*" Maybe he was being wise.

How much time forgiveness may require cannot be reduced to a simple formula. We inflict our sins on others, and they on us, in an infinite variety of relationships, each with its own history and milieu, each with its own balance of power and vulnerability, each with its own hazards and opportunities. Each incident that gives rise to questions of forgiveness is a new puzzle, never before solved, each with its own time line.

In today's appointed gospel text, Peter asks Jesus a question big enough for the ages and relevant enough for each of us here and now. "*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.*"

To explain why we should persevere so in our forgiving, Jesus tells a parable that puts our forgiveness of others in the context of God's forgiveness of us. I'm sure you've all heard a dozen sermons about how staggering a sum is represented by ten thousand talents, the amount that a slave was forgiven by a king. And we've heard how the amount owed to that same slave by a fellow slave was a laughably small pittance. And yet the slave who had been forgiven was himself unable to forgive. The consequences are catastrophic. And what about the consequences for you and me? We can be so diminished and become so embittered when we stall or give up on the discipline and gift of forgiveness.

When Jesus tells Peter that he is to forgive another seventy-seven, we may be prone to imagining forgiveness as a one-size fits all mandate. We may imagine that the first instance of a sin against us and its requirement of forgiveness basically has the same weight and contours and half-life of the fourteenth instance or the forty seventh or the seventy fifth.

But what if the *seventy-seven* on the lips of Jesus was, at least in part, about the fact that forgiveness can be a long haul. Sometimes you feel as if you are getting nowhere, caught on a treadmill of shame and '*why bother?*' Sometimes, despite all of your prayers and good intentions and the passage of time, resentment and pain persist.

What if 'seventy-seven' means, at least in part, Don't throw in the towel, even after 'seven times.' Keep working at it. Keep learning and praying and practicing. Because every once in a while, you will comprehend the enormity of the gift of life that God has given you. And every once in a while, all of the religious talk talk talk about grace will come alive for you in ways that will set you free. That's the moment when you will genuinely recognize, "*I am ready...*" Ready to forgive.

And it's also true that every once in a while, the sin of another will become lodged in you, and her or his fate may then be partly in your hands. Like it or not, you may have some inexorable choice or role in crushing them or setting them free, sentencing them to hell or giving them a foretaste of the kingdom of heaven. Of course we are to set them free. And finding our way there may take some time.

*Seventy-seven* does seem to require us to work and pray toward setting them and ourselves free. *Seventy-seven* may also give us permission to take the time to do the hard work, to get to the point of "*I am ready.*" Amen.