

“FORGIVENESS DOESN’T COMPUTE”

Matthew 18:21-35

Sermon by Mack Dennis, Senior Pastor

Then Peter, the rock on whom the church is built, comes and says to Jesus, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?”

...Before we get to Jesus’ response, let’s pause to consider what a wonderful heart Peter has, and what a kind and eager soul Peter must be. Already implicit in his question is a willingness to forgive the same sinner not once or twice, not three or five times, and not six, but *seven* times. Already there is an openness in him, an advanced wisdom about God’s own heart, and a level of deep understanding about what it means to follow Jesus. That Peter suggests forgiving seven times is also significant because seven is a divine number. There is a rich beauty in Peter’s suggesting this specific number. It reveals that Peter already recognizes that forgiveness between brothers and sisters is a sacred matter, one that commingles with and ultimately reflects God’s loving-kindness.

Jesus’ answer is fascinating. Peter must be stunned by it. Rather than look on Peter and love him for his kindhearted imagination about forgiveness, Jesus turns Peter’s Excel spreadsheet into a multiplication table: “Not seven times, but...*seventy-seven times*.” There are divine sevens, and there are divine multiples of seven. Jesus might as well have said a million, a jillion, a quintillion. Jesus might as well have said *infinity*. In matters of forgiveness, there’s no abacus, no calculator, no equation to plug in. Because we’re not dealing in transactions and commodities, but with collisions between human hearts, which is the same as saying collisions of entire universes. How do you calculate a supernova? Jesus reveals the hairline fracture in Peter’s logic: “Who’s still counting forgivenesses after numbers ‘one’ and ‘two’?” We forgive in ways that don’t compute because we’ve been forgiven in ways we can’t compute.

I imagine that each of us, whether we’re children or adults, can think of someone who has at least slighted us in a way that left an enduring mark. Perhaps all of us can immediately recall far more serious encounters that broke something so deep inside it seems even beyond God’s healing reach. Then there are some of us who have had to endure nearly unimaginable abuses from others that would shatter anyone. For these atrocities, even the idea of *considering* forgiveness is offensive.

There are several mistakes we make about forgiveness that make it impossible. The first mistake we make is assuming forgiving means forgetting. As if the deep wounds we carry could ever be forgotten. The human brain doesn’t work that way. The word *forgive* does not carry that weight. Forgiveness is more akin to letting go, to releasing, to *sending away*. We pressure ourselves not to forgive until we forget. Convincing ourselves we can’t forget, we don’t forgive.

A second mistake we make about forgiveness is turning it into permissiveness. Abusers, notably domestic abusers, appeal to forgiveness in order to justify and continue their cruelty. The abused stay in relationships out of a sense of guilt that moving to safer ground means being

unfaithful. I want to be clear that if you are in such a relationship, know that God did not create you for violence but for peace. You can be faithful while also getting out of harm's way.

Yet another mistake we make about forgiveness is regarding it as optional. It isn't. Remember the conclusion to the Lord's Prayer in Matthew, "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." That is, if it weren't for forgiveness, we would not know God. Forgiveness spans the gap between God and us. Forgiveness is God's way to us, and it is our way back to God.

But as we grow older, we are no less vulnerable to betrayals and abuses. Our relationships grow more complex, the stakes increase. As life bangs us up we begin to be able to count the scars. We remember how we got each one. We carry our pain in sterile bags we cart around like hospital patients, while the poison drips intravenously into our veins. We tote the toxins of our past in liquid form. Their solution includes an agent that, over time, hardens our arteries and petrifies our heart valves. And how we *do* protect our pic lines.

Peter, the dear soul, "As many as seven times?" What a dreamer. We struggle to forgive once!

Jesus tells Peter a parable about the kingdom of heaven. A king wishes to settle accounts with his slaves. He forgives one slave who owes 10,000 talents, an amount that might as well mean a million, jillion, quintillion. He'll never pay it back. An entire nation of people couldn't pay it back. But when this same slave has an opportunity to forgive a fellow slave a comparatively paltry sum, the forgiven slave turns into a cruel repo man, seizes his co-worker by the throat, and demands repayment. When the king finds out what this slave has done, he hands him over to be tortured until he could pay his original, impossible debt.

In this parable that mentions specific amounts, I'm inclined to keep counting. (Come alongside me in this logic, if you will.) If I'm one of these slaves, I must be the one who owes less. I can't possibly be the one who owes 10,000 talents. I've never racked up that much debt. I've never committed any great atrocity. I've never bombed a subway. Or flown a plane into a building. Or abused a child. Or walked into a Bible study with a gun and a heart of darkness. If I'm a character in this parable, am I not the slave who owes a pittance, a victim of my fellow slave's cruelty? Let him work on his forgiveness, first, and then we'll move on to mine. He owes his life and the U. S. Treasury, while I owe him a set of hands for the next harvest.

But there I go counting again, even though forgiveness doesn't compute. I've forgotten that this parable is set in a chapter about the character of a Christian community, the extraordinary gathering of followers who live by a different ethic than the world, a church whose very existence is called to embody and manifest the characteristic, loving-kindness of God. So, the question is not about how much I owe or don't owe, or whether I'm justified. The question is, does God exist in communities that aren't gathered and governed by forgiveness?

Earlier this year, Dylan Roof, was sentenced to death for killing 9 African-Americans in their own church during their weekly Bible study. He entered Emanuel AME Church, more often called "Mother Emanuel" for its deep roots in Charleston's black community, and its rich

history of excellence and faithfulness. He sat down with them and even participated in the study. Then he executed them.

At his sentencing, there were opportunities for family members of the victims to address him. One person called him a “spawn of Satan.” She continued, “You will rot in hell where you belong...I hope your guilt eats you alive. While you're pleading for life and begging for your life, I hope God forgives you, the one sin I'm not sure even he can forgive.”

Who could possibly blame her? Who knows whether she might yet forgive him, or go on being tortured by him. God never stops working on our hearts. And what courage it must have taken for her simply to face the murderer.

But there was another voice, the testimony of survivor Felicia Sanders, whose son, Tywanza, was killed. Fighting back tears, she addressed Roof and said, “I can't hear balloons pop. I can't see the fireworks...I can't shut my eyes to pray because I need to keep them open to see whoever's around me. You took my love away from me...” But then she said, “I forgive you...may God have mercy on your soul.”

How the power of God dwells with enduring strength in Charleston! How the power of God absorbs and exhausts the evil perpetrated on God's own people. How we know the gospel exists there because of the forgiving testimony of a person shaped by a forgiving community.

To forgive seven times is good. But seven times ends at seven, which implies that we can finish forgiving. So, then, how many is *seventy-seven* times? In this particular equation, *seventy-seven* equals...*one*. To forgive seventy-seven times honors the simple fact that to truly forgive one person once means that we've done something eternal.

To forgive once is to forgive eternally, because to forgive at all is to embody the one whose forgiveness doesn't compute...the God whose loving kindness, as the Psalmist says, “extends as high as the heavens are above the earth...”