

### **Matthew 18:21-35**

<sup>21</sup>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?” <sup>22</sup>Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

<sup>23</sup>“For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. <sup>24</sup>When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; <sup>25</sup>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. <sup>26</sup>So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ <sup>27</sup>And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. <sup>28</sup>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.’ <sup>29</sup>Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ <sup>30</sup>But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. <sup>31</sup>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. <sup>32</sup>Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. <sup>33</sup>Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ <sup>34</sup>And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. <sup>35</sup>So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

Grace and peace to you, from God, our Heavenly Creator and our Lord, and Savior, Jesus Christ.

How often do we forgive? And how often are the circumstances to the degree that we experience this morning in our lessons?

Let's go into our way-back machine for a minute and remember the story of Joseph, and his brothers, and their dad. Joseph is the favored one, lifted up out of the family by his dad, and revered better than any of the rest of the family. You might remember his coat of many colors, the symbol of his dad's adoration, that kinda got him sold into slavery by his brothers. All was not lost. He ended up in Egypt and sold again into Pharaoh's service, where he interpreted dreams, predicted an unprecedented famine and guided the Egyptian preparation for this famine, making him an advisor to the mightiest kingdom in the age. Joseph was placed in charge of distribution of these supplies and meets his brothers, who had long thought him dead, because that's what they wished. Joseph forgives, and offers his brothers relief from the famine, more than they asked. Given his father's advanced age and failing health, Joseph is reunited with him one time, at the border of Israel and Egypt, once before death.

Joseph's brothers are again driven into a place of fear; fear of the retribution of their brother for what they had done and share with him those fears through a desire that their dad may, or may not have actually stated. We already know that Joseph forgave his brothers when he saw them in line to get provisions during the famine that occurred more than 17 years before this point in Genesis. It would seem that Joseph's brother's felt that the respect, love and fear that Joseph maintained for their dad is what kept his desire for revenge at bay; and now that their father is dead, these brothers might now be dealt with according to their iniquity. Joseph assures them, again, of his devotion and care to them; speaks kindly and underscores the blessing for perhaps millions of people that was made possible through their actions.

Is offering "forgiveness" the hardest part?

Our psalm this morning underpins the actions, feelings and outreach of Joseph from a heavenly perspective. Blessing God, or pouring out our affection and gratitude for God, as God does the same unto us: forgiveness of sin absolutely, healing, redemption from the grave, granting us all that we need in order to give similar provision to others – to share what has been given us. "As far as East is from West You, God, have removed our transgressions from us". That's a pretty great distance.

In global terms, the furthest east could be from west is 24,901 miles (at the equator). I cannot fathom that distance... I mean, I can understand it, but it's such a great distance that it seems overkill. You know? Why do my sins need to be so far removed in order for me to recognize the immensity of God's forgiveness?

Is recognizing forgiveness the hardest part?

I don't often bring all the lessons overtly into the words I share on any given Sunday. There are usually pretty easy themes in each that culminate in the Gospel reading, so synthesizing all of them together becomes easy. Today however, we're looking at distinct pieces in a puzzle to get the full picture of Christ's Gospel. Genesis reminds of the forgiveness Joseph grants his brothers for atrocities we cannot fathom, and underscores that even amidst the tragedy Joseph was able to trust God and surrender to God and see this tragedy turned into a blessing. One for Joseph, and one for his brothers, as Joseph is able to forgive, Forgive bigly. Our Psalm reminds us of the sheer enormity of God's forgiveness, describing the breadth and depth of our Creator's steadfastness with us to unfathomable measure – to assure us of the absoluteness of God's forgiveness, even when we cannot begin to understand.

Paul gives us another piece. A slightly confusing piece. It's an important piece, though.

Paul is talking about everyone's favorite topic: conflict in the community. I like Paul, a lot. He deals with things in a manner of matter-of-fact that I aspire to. Never afraid to offer admonition, especially on things that conflict with his experiences or the messages, from the Spirit, written on his heart. He writes from a place of passion and compassion, and while his words may seem harsh, he's simply trying to make straight the crooked paths before believers. So, here we are being introduced to Paul's understanding of quarrels affecting the church in Rome; affecting them to the extent that they are unable to faithfully live out Christ's call in ministry. He directly addresses two groups: the weak, and the strong. While it's a series of issues about which Paul is aware, he is also quite confident that his audience knows what he's talking about; we are kind of left to infer what the actual issues are, because Paul doesn't share those as I'm sure Paul had no idea that this letter would be shared with the church 1900 years later. In this it has to do with eating. As house-churches were the norm during this time, it was customary to share a meal as part of the gathering. Believers sitting down in their worship spaces that also doubled as living spaces and inviting those gathered to share a meal together. Yet, this aspect of that worship reality was causing conflict.

Paul is careful not to attribute the conflict between Jews and Gentiles, but relegating the groups between those who were weak in faith (or those who would abstain from eating certain things, like meat), and those who were strong in faith (who would eat anything, basically).

Paul's point is communication and mutual respect, understanding that both the weak in faith, and the strong, are important, and only through engaging the stories of the individuals involved can we truly become supportive of one another in God's call to the community. Jesus highlights the process. "Not just 7 times, but 77 times." Why? Probably because like Joseph's brothers, we need consistent affirmation that the forgiveness is real, and our sin often results in guilt, which doesn't go away at the first sign of kindness. Repentance is not a switch that gets flipped, even when it is sincere. Often, the more sincere the turning around, the more times we need to hear that we are forgiven.

Seminary students are not unlike any other community of humans, in that we express our faith differently – Paul could probably categorize us as he does the Romans. We're all learning, confident in the call from God that gathered us together, but still ignorant to many lessons that we must learn to become faithful servant leaders in the church. We often forget that part... the learning part; the part that might require 77 opportunities to forgive one sin against us.

It was around this time of year. Well into the semester, we were still welcoming new members to our little seminarian enclave, learning about one another; seeing where we might smooth some rough edges, and help define other skills better for one another. I had just moved to campus after retirement and was working on not consistently viewing every fellow student through a framework of “pipeliner” (those who came to Seminary directly after completion of an undergrad degree) and us “second career” types (those who worked elsewhere for 20, or so, years). Those of us going on to internship at the end of the year were working on interviews and paperwork for matching events with sites all over the northeast part of our country. Of that small community, one of us was struggling with allyship. Often, with that word “allyship” it is relegated to support of our LGBTQIA+ siblings, but in this context, I mean into a broader sense of supporting anyone not white, identifying as their birth gender and heterosexual. In terms of future Lutheran Leaders, that’s a pretty large swath of people; but to this student’s credit there was a lot of trying happening. And the trying often leaned on members of those groups, the LGBTQIA+ and students of color to help in the defining of what allyship is in the context of those groups.

Organically, that's not bad, because as we have all learned this year, it is better to gain knowledge of the experience of others through relationship, however, in this case there was a severe, almost damaging expectation that persons of Color and the LGBTQIA+ siblings should teach this student how to be an ally, almost tokenizing the relationship; setting a pall of unease over the relationship where there is not a healthy exchange of ideas and experiences, but a reliance on the information to provide the epiphany that would lock in the motivation to become a true ally. We might say that this student's heart was in the right place, but the method through which they engaged learning was unhealthy, and did, indeed, begin to damage students relied upon to help. Boundaries were crossed, and the community started to fracture, not unlike the Romans, and not unlike Joseph and his brothers. In the case that defined the last straw for me, my neighbor was hurt, deeply, in a betrayal of trust through the sharing of personal information to a potential internship employer. Ignorance was the student's sin. My neighbor was devastated and hurt deeply – to the extent that concern centered around the possibility that my neighbor would no longer be able to continue his call to ministry. You see? My neighbor already had his Masters of Divinity, had accomplished this milestone in the 1990's, but due to rules in the church, couldn't become a pastor in the Lutheran church because he was gay.



But now, he can live out his call into ministry as his authentic self, and so the thought of our fellow student's ignorance thwarting that possibility again was deeply traumatic. Deeply. And yet? Forgiveness came. First, because my neighbor needed to move on, and forgiveness was a way for him to stop dwelling on the trauma and pain of the betrayal of a "friend". Second, because another student and I confronted the struggling student as allies to my neighbor and explained in greater terms what being an ally was, and how we should go about being an ally without creating token relationships. Forgiveness was offered a third time. Forgiveness became the heart of a new relationship within that community as it was offered a fourth and fifth time as our fellow student was able to approach others within the community and express and live out the lessons learned through the sin; living into the repentance journey the student embarked upon the moment the betrayal was pointed out to him.

Not 7 times, but 77 times.

Jesus isn't talking about a specific number of times that a person should be forgiven, or a specific number of times we should seek forgiveness when we stray.

Jesus is referring to the layers of growth that happen when a community is fractured, when one sin can turn into many; but when the repentance, the seeking to reconcile, is sincere that forgiveness must be continually offered until the turning around is complete.

If one of us is sincere in our desire to be reconciled into the community, there is no measure to the amount of forgiveness we should seek or offer. Because that's the measure of God's loving mercy with us. We all know that as we seek forgiveness from God, we embark on another layer of faith in our journey with God. In that journey we become enlightened to new aspects of what our sin may have done, who we may have hurt, or how our actions may have damaged the community. Repentance is not easy; it isn't a once and done; there is no switch. As we understand that for ourselves, Jesus is telling us that we need to remember that for others: not just 7 times, but 77 times. We are called to learn, and grow always into deeper relationship with God, and one another. Be ready siblings, 77 times ready to offer God's grace and mercy to anyone seeking it – be ready to grow in community, and in faith, together.

Amen.