

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

September 14, 2023 (Proper 19, Year A)
Matthew 18:21-35

There's a story about a parent who came to the principal of a school, irate over something a teacher had done. "That's three strikes," the parent said. "That's it"

The principal commented on the unfairness of it. "One of those strikes is from two years ago," he said. "The other is from last year. Don't we ever get a new inning around here?"

In the legal system, and in human relationships, baseball has been a favorite metaphor for counting transgressions. Three strikes and you're out! But, if you know baseball, you know that's only a selective use of the metaphor. After all, there are three outs PER INNING. And the batter, who's out the first time up, will probably have another three or four at-bats. And the teams come back to play the next day, and the next, and it's a long season. Even baseball gives people a second chance. But people don't.

Peter had a discussion with Jesus about forgiveness. "Seven strikes and you're out! Does that sound generous enough, Jesus?" Now Peter had good reason to feel pretty good about himself there. Jewish scribal law clearly read: "If a man transgresses one time, forgive him. If a man transgresses two times, forgive him. If a man transgresses three times, forgive him. If a man transgresses FOUR times, do NOT forgive him." What Peter had done was to take this law of limited forgiveness, multiply it by two and even add one, and then sit back with a smile on his face and say: "Now how's that for being a great guy?" He expects Jesus to pat him on the head.

But Jesus' response suggests that there's MORE than ONE inning in this game. Now to be perfectly honest, the Greek, the original language here, is a little ambiguous on how MANY innings. The phrase can mean either, "Forgive seventy TIMES seven times" (like the older translations used to have), or more likely "seventy times AND seven" (i.e., Peter's original seven plus seventy). That's seventy-seven.

But the number isn't the POINT, just that they're LARGE numbers. HOWEVER you understand the Greek, Jesus isn't saying that you should carefully KEEP TRACK up to either 490 or 77, but then, on that 491st or 78th time, "Pow!" I'm pretty sure that's not what He had in mind. Jesus' point, in introducing the math, such large numbers, is to say, "DON'T do the math! STOP COUNTING! Stop keeping track of offenses and simply forgive. Whoever COUNTS hasn't forgiven at all, but is only biding their time."

In baseball, the focus is on getting people out. In forgiveness, the focus for Christians is on getting and KEEPING people IN. The parable he tells goes even further: forgiveness isn't a game with SCOREKEEPING at ALL. The servant, who'd been SHOWN so much mercy, is punished for his LACK of mercy. It raises an important question: Do we really want God "doing the math" on OUR offenses? So why are we so quick to count the offenses of OTHERS? If God has forgiven the tremendous debt WE owe, how can we be so stingy in our forgiveness of others – especially when the offenses are so nit-picky in comparison?

The parable illustrates that, in many ways, forgiving isn't FOR the OTHER person's sake, but for our OWN well-being. The person who injured you may NEVER apologize. They may feel NO REMORSE. They may not even REMEMBER what they did to you. So holding on to the resentment, to the grudge, really only affects YOU. As someone once said, "Resentment is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die." Resentment eats away at you and drives you mad. So when you hold on to that anger, that person, and what they did, CONTROLS a part of you. Every time that injury comes to mind, they hurt you again and again, over and over and over. As Ann Landers put it, "Hanging onto resentment is letting someone you despise LIVE rent-free in your head."

And they might not even KNOW or CARE that they hurt us. Why do we DO this to ourselves? You can never be free to be a whole person until you are able to forgive. Forgiveness HEALS YOU.

Now let's be clear about this – forgiveness is NOT reconciliation, that's something else altogether. Reconciliation REQUIRES forgiveness as a first step, but it is NOT the same THING as forgiveness. Sometimes, reconciliation isn't possible. Sometimes, for your OWN sake, the relationship must end. And sometimes, the AUTHORITIES need to be called. Justice is a matter for the police; FORGIVENESS is for YOU.

Resentment is spiritually holding onto that person that hurt you by the neck. Like I said, keeping that link with a person who may not even care how you feel. Forgiveness is simply taking your hand off the other person's throat. And the funny thing is, when you do, it's YOU who can breathe again. It won't make things right, and you may never speak to that person again, but they WON'T be able to HURT you ANYMORE. A memory, without the RESENTMENT, is just a memory, and we can LIVE with that.

We forgive, not because THEY are worth it, but because WE are. Forgiveness heals US.

I read a blog on this subject this week by Rachel Pieh Jones, that I found really helpful. This is what she wrote:

I used to think that when Jesus said to forgive seventy times seven times, he meant that people would be SO mean, SO sinful, that they would KEEP sinning against me (and I against them) and I should FORGIVE each new transgression as READILY as the first. And forgiving them looked something like accepting their apology, shaking their hand, or kissing their cheek and hugging, and saying, "I forgive you."

That seemed easy enough. I could offer a limp hand or a sideways hug, mumble the words in a quiet voice, and move on. One sin against me, one forgiveness offered, voila, the scales were balanced.

Until this method stopped working. Until a friend hurt me so deeply I couldn't breathe. Until mumbling, "I forgive you" didn't erase the anger, bitterness, and sick feeling. Until she bolted so quickly there was no time for shaking hands and I couldn't accept an apology that has never been offered.

What does forgiveness look like THEN? Was it a one for one deal? Was I supposed to recall EACH lie, deception, angry word, hurtful action, and pronounce over them, one by one, "Forgiven?"

When I tried to DO that, I simply ended up in the bathroom crying. Remembering didn't help, it only increased the clenching in my gut and the raging desire to scream. This didn't feel like forgiveness.

Probably because it wasn't.

I had twisted the call to forgive into an opportunity to keep a record of wrongs. In the name of forgiveness, I let my heart grow bitter as I felt, fresh, each wrong against me.

I had to learn that seventy times seven doesn't mean one for one, every time someone sins against you. It means every time you feel angry about that ONE SINGLE sin, forgive it again. It means forgiveness is on-going, a lifestyle, something that must be RE-visited and RE-done. Forgiveness is not a one-time event, shake hands and it is over. It is a state of being.

I drove by my friend's house and felt angry AGAIN. So I stopped the car and addressed my heart and forgave her. I heard her name and felt angry AGAIN, about the SAME thing, so I addressed my heart and forgave her. I stumbled across a photo of her and felt angry AGAIN, about the SAME thing, so again I forgave her.

At first, these moments of anger and forgiving came at me fast and constant. As time passed, they sprang up with less frequency and after a few years, I rarely felt angry anymore. But still, once in a while and at unexpected times, a surge of memory and bitterness tries to stake claim and I have to forgive again.

This is seventy times seven. Over and OVER AND OVER, the SAME sin, the SAME hurt. There is no mumbling here, there is no limp handshake. There is a wrestling and a battle and an acknowledgement of the pain. And then there is a canceling of the debt that is owed, a canceling of the right to run down a list of wrongs.

I'm thankful that God does not have these same issues. For God, once a sin is forgiven, it is forgiven. He harbors no bitterness, no anger, no need to revisit the pain and forgive again. I continue to sin against him and seventy times seven becomes a pouring out of grace. For each sin, forgiveness is available, and I drink it in, soak it up, feel the cleansing.

Then I turn it around and offer it, again, to my friend.

Jesus says, "Peter you're starting with the wrong question. It's not 'how many times must I forgive?' It's 'how many times have YOU BEEN forgiven?' Start there, Peter, and see what a difference it makes. For HEAVEN'S SAKE, and for your OWN sake, STOP COUNTING. Forgive from the heart, as you have BEEN forgiven." Amen.