

The Rev. Kristin P. R. Wickersham  
Forgiveness and Healing  
A Sermon for St. Peter's Parish Church  
The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A  
September 13, 2020

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**Matthew 18:21-35**

*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."*

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In 2006 in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, there was a school shooting at a schoolhouse in the Amish community. Unlike most school shootings, this one happened in a community known for religious pacifism. News reports focused quite a lot on the reaction within the Amish community. They began with forgiveness. Amish attended the murderer's burial service, hugged his widow, and the members of his family. Forgiveness became the disbelieving byline in newspapers. People marveled at it with as much shock as they had the shooting.

To some extent, there's a mythos around the Amish. But the Amish are normal people, like you and me. They didn't get over the tragedy quickly. Many of them spent years in therapy and counseling. Some of the survivors continue to describe survivor's guilt, and symptoms of PTSD. The thing that makes the Amish notable isn't a magical ability to wash away grief and loss, it's their sheer determination to focus on their own healing. They understand that forgiveness is elemental to healing, and connects them to God.

In today's gospel reading, Peter asks Jesus to teach him about forgiveness. It isn't clear if Peter is bewildered, disbelieving, or simply confused. We can almost hear him thinking inside his own mind. Oh, my God. How many times do I have to do this hard thing? As many as seven?

Seven. Seven is a significant religious number. God created the world in seven days.. There were seven seas, seven colors of the rainbow, and seven loaves to feed a crowd, with seven baskets of

leftovers at the end. Then there are the seven last words of Jesus, which he spoke from the cross. Seven is a measurable number. It simultaneously signifies perfection and completeness. Peter wants to know what the ultimate goal is for his forgiveness. If I get to seven times, will that be enough? Will I be perfect and will my sacrifice be complete?

Jesus doesn't participate in the counting, he upends it. Forgiveness, he says, is something we can't count. If we did, it would limit the amount of compassion and mercy we give to others. In the kingdom of heaven, compassion and mercy are abundant and plentiful. In a place where they are not, records must be kept. When we're counting forgiveness, there's a reckoning that happens, and a holding-on. Debts are totaled, compared, and payment demanded. People become trapped in a prison of their own making. Where mercy is counted, prison and torture are distinct possibilities.

Peter isn't asking simply about his responsibilities for forgiveness, he's asking about the kingdom of God. He's trying to find out about the health of his own soul. How do I heal when someone has hurt me? He wants to know. And Jesus tells him, step away from the paradigm you're living in and the limited way in which you view the world. Walk into the abundance of the kingdom of heaven, and the lovingkindness of God.

The gospel writer Matthew talks repeatedly about the kingdom of heaven. It is central to his gospel. It's what we should be striving for, and Peter is striving for it in today's story. We need to be careful not to think about it as an intellectual goal, and inconceivable something far away from where we exist in this world. Remember that in Jesus, the Kingdom of Heaven has drawn near. Even now, it is breaking in all around us, if only we can see it. Not only in big ways, like forgiving murderers, but in small everyday ways. I recently saw a story about one of these everyday times.

There was a man who owned a house in a suburban neighborhood. He had a garage at the front of the house, and a short but wide driveway from the front sidewalk to the garage door and the front door of the house. He had a motion-detecting security camera at the front of the house, that would alert him when anyone walked up the driveway to the door. It made a noise inside and recorded what was happening outside. Helpful against burglars and package thieves. A curious thing began to happen. When the weather warmed up, every late afternoon at around the same time, his security alert would go off. Someone was on his property. When the man reviewed the security footage, he saw that each time it was the same person. A young boy, around 5 years old, riding a tiny bicycle. His mother walked nearby him with the family dog, but this boy, instead of riding on the sidewalk like all the other kids in the neighborhood, insisted on driving onto the man's property, up his driveway towards the door, then back down the hill. Now the man was irritated by this daily intrusion and the bother of listening to his alarm go off and needing to check who was at the door. He could have waited to go out to talk with the boy's mother to ask him to stay off the man's property, and explained the bother of the intrusion. But instead, the man had a thought. He went off and bought himself some sidewalk chalk. You might think he was going to write KEEP OFF PRIVATE PROPERTY on his driveway. Instead, the man went out and drew two curves from the sidewalk up to the door and back to the sidewalk. They were about 3 feet apart. That afternoon, along comes the boy, the mother, and the dog. On the videotape, you can see the boy pausing and looking at the chalked lines. Finally, with a certain amount of excitement, the boy turned his little bicycle, steered right between the two lines, and took a ride on this chalked track. The man had made a track for the bicycle, essentially inviting the boy into his life, and into enjoyment and freedom. Over time as the rains came the man would go outside and chalk the track again, each time a little more complicated. Ultimately it had a straightaway at the back with the words GO FASTER,

a big hairpin curve SLOW DOWN, and as it neared the sidewalk for an exit it read HEADS UP! You can watch the excitement of the boy in the videos. AS time passed, that little boy got better and better at bicycling. Other kids in the neighborhood saw the track and rode it too. As did some older children and even an adult or two.

Instead of getting entrenched in his own paradigm of how life should work -- values around: home ownership, property rights, and personal outrage, the man saw something different. He opened his heart to see an opportunity for connection. The biblical word for forgiveness also means letting go, releasing. Forgiveness releases us from the economy of counting the sins of others, or our own. Forgiveness doesn't count, it heals and connects. Through letting go, we connect ourselves to God's abundance and love so that we can experience it in the here and now. When we don't forgive, we hold on to grudges, slights, injuries and pain. The practice of forgiveness frees us from our bewildering sense of separation from God. Instead, we are freed to accept the healing grace of God's abundant love for us, a love that is beyond counting, beyond measure, beyond our deserving and more perfect than anything we could ask or imagine.

Amen.