

Sixteenth Weekend After Pentecost (RCL/A): "Forgive HOW Often?"
Genesis 50:15-21; Matthew 18:21-35
September 12-13, 2026
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Other than love and hope, is there a spiritual topic more relevant to our everyday lives than forgiveness? It's often where the rubber meets the road in our relationships : with loved ones, co-workers, neighbors, strangers – and God. 'So many layers to this onion:

- Will **God** forgive **me** my failures in love?
- How do **I** forgive **others** who have deeply hurt me or my loved ones?
- Will **others** forgive **me** for the times I've hurt them by what I've done or failed to do?
- And sometimes we may wonder: how can I ever forgive myself?

These are important questions. The heart of our faith is belief that our Father in Heaven sent Jesus to save us from our sins, to make **forgiveness** possible. In the wrap-up of the Apostles Creed we pray: "I believe in... **the forgiveness of sins**...."

We believe in it, but forgiveness is hard. It's certainly a topic we weigh each year when 9/11 rolls around again. Friday was the 25th anniversary of the towers coming down. Many of us know families who lost a loved one, either because they worked in or were visiting the towers, or because they were first responders who perished. None of the terrorists ever expressed regret or asked for forgiveness, as far as I know. Quite the contrary. So this is a classic case in which we ask, "Is forgiveness possible on our part, when the other party has never said, 'I'm sorry'?" Our faith says yes, forgiveness is possible. My ability to forgive is not limited by anybody else's inability to see the sin

they've committed, the harm they have caused. When I forgive I don't erase the consequences of the other person's actions, but I **do** free myself from the hatred and resentment that would otherwise consume my thoughts, chew up my energy, and chain me to the offender. The granting of forgiveness sets **me** free.

This coming week brings another anniversary: the 63rd anniversary of the white supremacist bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. On September 15, 1963, a bundle of dynamite planted by a KKK member killed 4 Sunday School children and injured 20 more church members. Martin Luther King, Jr., preached a eulogy at the funeral of 3 of the girls a couple days later. In part, he said that the children's deaths:

... say to each of us, black and white alike, that we must substitute courage for caution. They say to us that we must be concerned not merely about who murdered them, but about the system, the way of life, the philosophy which produced the murderers. Their death says to us that we must work passionately and unrelentingly for the realization of the American dream.

And so my friends, they did not die in vain.

God still has a way of wringing good out of evil. [King was certainly referencing a verse from today's first lesson, Joseph saying to the brothers who left him for dead in a ditch: "*You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good.*" (Genesis 50:20) King continued:] And history has proven over and over again that unmerited suffering is redemptive. The innocent blood of these little girls may well serve as a redemptive force that will bring new light to this dark city. The holy Scripture says, "A little child shall lead them." The death of these little children may lead our whole Southland from the low road of man's inhumanity to man to the high road of peace and brotherhood.

“Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good.” (Genesis 50:20) That is a beautiful springboard for forgiveness, a clear rejection of the desire for vengeance, and an outlook that fosters the coming of the kingdom of heaven, the way Jesus frames the parable of the unforgiving servant, which actually showcases the all-forgiving king.

Back to where we started. Forgiveness is hard. Especially repeated forgiveness. I wonder if Peter had any particular person or situation in mind when he asked Jesus, *“Master, how many times do I forgive a brother or sister who hurts me? Seven?”* (Matt. 18:21, *The Message*) Peter probably thought he was being noble or generous by suggesting a whole **7** times, since rabbis said that forgiving **3** times was acceptable. Of course Jesus blows both those numbers out of the water by citing **seventy-seven** times, which of course isn’t meant to be taken literally, but is a poetic way of saying, “As many times as it takes; as many times as someone comes to you asking forgiveness, grant it.” God says, “Grant it to others as often as I grant it to you.” (I don’t know about you, but I’ve certainly asked for forgiveness more than seventy-seven times!)

Now, Jesus saying we should forgive unendingly has sometimes been misunderstood along the Way, misinterpreted to mean that Christians should be doormats, letting people step all over us. That is **not** Jesus’ drift. Allowing others to abuse us, especially repeatedly, is not holy or healthy behavior. We’d actually describe that as co-dependent behavior, enabling somebody else’s sickness to fester untreated, and letting ourselves be injured or making ourselves sick in the process.

In this parable Jesus tells, we sense that the “repentance,” the regret, of the servant with the unimaginable, unpayable debt of 10,000 talents, isn’t real, because he leaves his

merciful master's presence with his debt **forgiven**, not just reduced, not just on a compassionate payment plan, but **forgiven**, and yet he proceeds to shake down his fellow servant who owes him much, much less. He actually consigns the other guy to debtor's prison. That servant also pleads for pity, for time to pay the debt; somehow I'm more inclined to believe the genuine nature of **this** servant's regret.

The point of the parable, though, isn't how real the slaves' repentance is. It's how extreme and total the **master's mercy** is. The bottom line? We are to forgive as we have been forgiven **from on high**. We are not to overlook the fact that Peter, who's probably got some repeat offender in mind and who's anxious for an exact point when he can say, "Enough is enough, buddy, I'm done with you!" – this same Peter will soon deny his Lord three times and be very much in need of his Lord's extravagant mercy.

Above all, we are not to forget that each one of us **is** the lost lamb whom the Good Shepherd loves so much that He leaves the 99 behind to seek us out. Jesus doesn't just want to **forgive** us. He wants to be **reconciled** with us, for us to come with genuinely sorrowful hearts for our failures in love, so we can be renewed in our "communion" with Him. Reconciliation means **both** parties come to the table, **both** parties want to be in meaningful, loving relationship, unlike 9/11 and unlike the situation with the 16th Street Church bombing. May the Holy Spirit grant us clear vision to see our failures in love, truly repentant hearts, boldness in asking forgiveness, full trust in God's desire to forgive us, full grace to forgive others, and holy passion to exercise mercy and reject vengeance in all circumstances. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham

