

Matthew 18:21-35

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times?"

"Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. The servant fell on his knees before him. "Be patient with me," he begged, "and I will pay back everything." The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. "But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. Pay back what you owe me! He demanded. "His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, "Be patient with me, and I will pay you back." "But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. Then the master called the servant in. You wicked servant, he said, "I cancelled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you? In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay him back all he owed. This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."

"Forgiving Heart"

The ninth step in the 1500 year old tradition of Benedictine spirituality is: Be willing to learn from others. Sister Joan Chittister writes: The next step to inner freedom invites you to be willing to learn from others. Growth in freedom is not only self-acceptance, it is also being open to the wisdom of others. It is better to ask the way ten times than to take the wrong road once," the Jewish proverb reads. This step to freedom tells you to stay in the stream of life, to learn from what others have learned before you, to value the truths taught by others, to seek out wisdom and enshrine it in your heart. This step gives you the right to ask the questions to which you do not know the answers. It asks you to attach yourself to teachers so that you do not make the mistake of becoming your own blind guide. It takes much time to learn all the secrets of life by yourself. It is a tragedy to be a world unto yourself, to make yourself unfit for the relationships that could enrich you beyond your merit and despite your limitations. This eighth step brings you to such respect for others that you can follow those who have already travelled the path to inner freedom rather than get lost trying to find one by yourself. (The way to Inner Freedom, p. 49)

In the gospel reading for today we find Peter asking Jesus to be his teacher. He wanted some clarification on his religious requirement to forgive. In Jesus' time and according to Jewish law, Jews had to forgive a debtor of money, insult, or abuse, three times. Jesus upped it to the unlimited number of seventy-times-seven. But what exactly is this gospel forgiveness that Jesus thinks is possible for us to do without end? Forgiveness is an internal and personal spiritual practice. It is the head and heart ability to release an offender from the judgment s/he deserves, to refrain from keeping score, and to refuse to do pay back. Unlike reconciliation, forgiveness doesn't depend on the co-operation of any other person. We can forgive a person who has done terrible things to us, even if they have died. We can forgive our enemies without them knowing it. We can forgive ourselves without being forgiven by the person we have sinned against. And, according to this teaching of Jesus, with the help of God, we can, and must, forgive an unlimited number of times.

But, as we all know, forgiving is hard to do. The Encyclopedia of Humor (p. 130) shares a story about two sisters, 'Alice and Mildred, who kept up a feud for thirty years. On Mildred's seventieth birthday, Alice, who was seventy-five, felt a pang of remorse, but it passed. Yet later, when she heard Mildred was ill, felt compelled to visit. From her sickbed, Mildred looked sternly at her sister. At last she said in a faint voice, "the doctors say I'm seriously ill, Alice. If I pass away, I want you to know you're forgiven. But if I pull through, things stay as they are!"

Because Jesus also knew that forgiving is hard to do, he told the parable of the unforgiving servant. So what do you think? "Why didn't the pardoned slave return the favor of mercy?" In 'Once More from the Heart,' Barbara Brown Taylor suggests 'that the reason is that he really did not experience forgiveness and he missed the significance of what had happened to him. Somehow, when the king released him and forgave him his debt, he did not get it. He thought he had gotten away with something. He thought he had pulled a fast one. He thought the king was soft in the head to buy such an obvious lie' (The Seeds of Heaven, p. 96).

I also wonder if the servant failed to receive forgiveness because he had a distorted image of God in his mind's eye. What if his internalized version of Divine Power was not like the Forgiving God of Israel, whom Jesus knew as merciful and just, compassionate and patient, loving and kind in heart? What if the slave's internalized 'higher power' was unforgiving and vengeful, punishing, and abusive in nature? If so, did Jesus tell the parable of the unforgiving servant to correct his distorted image of the Divine?

In a UCC Daily Devotional, Rev. William Green reflected: 'The gospel is all about God's initiative in bridging the breach between ourselves and God and ourselves and one another. "Gospel" is derived from the old English, "God's spell." Under the influence of God's Spell we see more clearly than ever love we haven't deserved, grace we couldn't bring on ourselves, and hope when we'd given up. Blessed by initiatives we could not

take or deserve—expressions of grace not always recognized or appreciated at the time—we in turn are to take comparable initiatives with others" (Sept. 4, 2011). Forgiveness is a Divine gift.

Forgive . . . from your heart.

Matt. 18:35

Jesus taught that infinite forgiveness of mistakes, shame, guilt, and secret debt is the essential work of Holy Love. Because Jesus knew God's heart, we trust that God will never do us harm. Graced with this faith of being anchored securely in God's heart, we are freed from the bondage of fear, freed from past mistakes, and filled with God's Spirit for forgiving others. In this faith we pray with Jesus: Our Father who art in heaven . . . forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.

One sixteen year old flood victim celebrated her birthday by watching bodies float by in the waters which flowed past her family's stalled car. As she silently watched death pass by she questioned in her own heart, 'How can I forgive God for letting such a thing happen?' A few miles away a mother was losing grip on her infant daughter and cursed her grandmother for refusing to leave home. She thought, 'How can I forgive her for only thinking of herself?' At the same moment, a New York widower and father could not forgive himself for the death of his child on 9/11. Daily he punished himself with: "If only I had not let my wife put our daughter in the day care center at the towers and let my sister watch her instead."

In our journey of faith, Jesus is our best friend for shedding light on the ways in which we fail to forgive God, ourselves, and others. In our prayerful walk with Him under God's Spell, seventy-times-seven forgiveness gets etched in our hearts, so that with followers of Jesus' in every age we gratefully sing:

What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry, everything to God in prayer!
O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry, everything to God in prayer. Amen