

Sermon 3-19-23
Paul Purdue preaching

Asking for all of us Peter inquired, "Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Seven times?" Seven forgiveness "credits" is a generous allotment, far exceeding the transactional arithmetic most of us apply to giving, forgiveness, or goodness. We keep a tally, "You forgave me, I forgave you, you forgave me, I owe you a forgiveness." Have you felt this transactional pressure when exchanging gifts? You open a handmade work of art and shudder knowing you grabbed a box of chocolates on the way over? We try to keep our relational balance sheets balanced. Now, loving friendships, strong partnerships, and life-giving relationships require mutual self-giving, if one party does all the relational work there is no relationship. Jesus taught the disciples to move on when they were not welcomed or heard, shaking off the unwelcome dust off from their sandals. (Matt. 10) So, Peter's suggestion of a seven offense forgiveness credit pushes the mercy ledger further into the red than most of us can tolerate. Jesus meets Peter's generous seven and raises it, "Not just seven times, but rather as many as seventy times seven."

How many times? 70×7 forgiveness credits, 490 sins against you, or maybe even 7 to the 77th power debts endured! Jesus invites us to toss out the relational arithmetic and stop counting of offenses received and forgiveness owed. Instead, Jesus invites us to be a force for forgiveness in the world. Embody forgiveness. Forgive from your heart. Embody giving. Give from your heart. Embody love. Love God with all your heart, and allow that love to so deeply permeate your prayers and thoughts that love becomes your first response.

Moving through staggering systemic racism and death threats from Christian nationalists, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. resolved, "I have decided to stick to love. For I know love is ultimately the only answer to humanity's problems!" (Where Do We Go from Here) "Love is understanding, redemptive, creative, good-will for all people." (adapted from Love, Law and Civil Disobedience, 1963) Will we wait for an even ledger or stick to loving, giving and forgiving?

Jesus tells us a story, a parade about how unforgiveness locks up our soul in a prison of paybacks and wrongs suffered. "God's kin-dom is like..." where the king reviewed all the royal investments and discovered a banker owning ten thousand bags of gold. Those are Silicon Valley Bank debts. Called before the king, the fast-lane barron could not cover the loan. The king ordered every building, bank, boat, chariot, cabin, chalet, and wingtips be sold to pay the debt, but not only that, the banker, his wife and children would be sold as slaves. Shaken and shocked, the banker fell down and begged, "Please, be patient with me, and I'll pay you back." Now the king was filled with compassion (compassion is just who God is) and forgave the banker their billion dollar debt. On the way home, the banker called on a delinquent client. When that banker heard the exact same plea he had made to the king, the banker came up short on compassion. Enraged they physically assaulted the tenant over a few months rent, throwing them into a debtor's prison.

How did the forgiven banker lack compassion? As a forgiven and reconciled person, how did they fail to practice forgiveness? Why did they see rent owed instead of the beloved child of God standing before? How do we remain unchanged despite God's unmerited mercy? Why is it so hard to stay rooted and grounded in Christ's unbounded love and infinite forgiveness?

As I pulled onto Hillsboro boulevard, a massive older SUV clumsily invaded two lanes, cutting off a shiny silver Toyota. From where I sat, the SUV appeared unaware of their infraction. But that Toyota noticed it, laying on their horn, wildly gesticulating their hands and shaking violently while yelling inside an empty car. A few red lights later, I pulled past the Toyota, the driver's mouth still snapping and shoulders tense. The SUV had out of state tags, the driver looked bewildered, the passenger slumped against their window, blanket over shoulders, gauze bandage wrapped around their forearm, a white armband on their wrist. I guessed they were forlornly heading to Vanderbilt hospital. I wondered where that Toyota was heading? With two empty car seats, Maybe they needed to already be in the school rider line? Still, would an unforgiving air recirculate as the children rode home? Why not forgive a driving trespass? Is it better to be late or enraged? Why not give up one cycle at a redlight? Why not pray, "Lord in your mercy, hear my frustration, help me love, give, and forgive"?

I have a theory about why we hold onto wrongs suffered; it blends economics and worship. Jesus tells us flatly, "You cannot serve God and wealth. You will either be loyal to God and have contempt for wealth or you will love wealth and view God (mercy, compassion, forgiveness, welcome, generosity, patience) with suspension." (adapted Matthew 6) In Luke's version, Jesus gets more specific, "If you love those who love you, so what? If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? If you give and expect to be repaid, there is no holiness in that. (Break the pattern!) Love your enemies, stop judging, do good, forgive, and give expecting nothing in return. That is the way the children of the Most High act! God is kind to unlovely, ungrateful, and wicked people. Be compassionate just as your Creator is compassionate." (Luke 6) Will we stick to love or worship at the altars of privilege, pay back, power, and possessions?

Our poor banker got stuck in a transactional worldview; he must win to feel good about himself. He shouts "Pay me what you owe me! I demand my privilege!" He is not a sympathetic character, but often do we allow our market, education, or workplace performance to define who we are. He grabs the renter by the neck and tosses them in jail, maybe to prove his worth. But in the end, the unchanged banker dies alone, chained to his own unforgiveness. Despite being forgiven and reconciled, the banker never breaks free from living life like it is a competition.

Let us strive to be compassionate for God is compassionate; loving even the unlovely for God is love. (1 John 4) The Apostle Paul tells us that Christ nailed the record of our sins to the cross forgiving us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. Jesus set this aside. (Colossians 2) 1 Corinthians 13 tells us that love keeps no records of wrongs suffered. So then as forgiven and reconciled people,

let us love, forgive, and give expecting nothing in return, because that is who we long to become - we long to be people defined by love, forgiveness, and generous giving.

But how can we become loving people? It is not a coincidence that Jesus teaches us about prayer and forgiveness in the same section of the Sermon on the Mount. It is no accident that Jesus spends the night in prayer with friends before facing the cross's crucible. John Wesley called prayer the chief means or tool to bring God's grace and love into our lives. Prayer gives us space to exhale that anger, heartache, and defeat and breath in compassion, forgiveness, and our god-given humanity. Without prayer, devotion, and mediation we will never break free from the worship of wealth, position, and privilege. Prayer allows us to embody Christ's compassion, envision forgiveness, and see others with mercy and grace.

In Matthew 6, Jesus instructs us to not make a show of prayer, but to get alone with our soul! Prayer circles shared with trusted friends often help us navigate our souls better than hours praying alone. Jesus tells us to pray to our loving Heavenly Parent, sharing our fears and needs and grounding our day in embodying God's grace right here on planet earth. And then after sharing our needs, we pray:

"Forgive us for the ways we have wronged you- "

Life's great commandment is to love God and love all people as we love ourselves.

So as we examine the places we fall short of love, compassion, and justice,
we ask for God's and often other's forgiveness.

Confession helps us see others with compassion

"Just as we also forgive those who have wronged us."

It's our moment to remember to be a force for forgiveness and reconciliation in the world.

We resolve to stick to love
and we know forgiveness flows into our hearts at the rate we forgive others.

Such daily intentional praying reconnects us with God's boundless forgiveness. Hear the Psalmist pour out their heart to God, exhaling the depths and breathing in God's faithful love.

I cry out to you (about that lumbering driver, lumbering coworker, my ex, that terrible bumper sticker)

I cry out from the depths, Lord, Lord, my Lord.

Lord, my Lord, listen to my voice! Pay attention to my cry for mercy!

If you kept track of sins, Lord, my Lord, who would stand a chance?

(But Perfect Love does not keep such a ledger! Thank God!)

But forgiveness is with you—oh Lord, my Lord, my hope,
my whole being hopes, and I wait for God's promise.

My whole being waits for my Lord, more than the night watch waits for morning!

Israel (those who strive), wait for the Lord!

Because faithful love is with the Lord; great redemption is with our God!

God is the one who will redeem us!

God's faithful love will redeem us from all sin.

Prayer reminds us we have wronged folks and that humbling helps us see the world with compassion. Prayer reminds us to stick to love, to be a force for forgiveness, to see the world with mercy. So let us pray, "Lord in your mercy, help me be a person of mercy". Amen.