

How Many Times Should I Forgive? (Matthew 18:21-35)

As a saying goes, *‘a good question is better than a good answer’*. A good question helps us to stop and think and ponder deeper into its meaning or a motive behind that question. Peter asks Jesus with a simple question in our gospel today saying, *“Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how many times should I forgive?”* Perhaps this question was his anticipation to the competition or jealousy among the disciples about who is the greatest among them. Whatever motive he might have but his question is still relevant question for us to ponder even today. How many times should we forgive if someone sins against us? To forgive as many as seven times seems sufficient and quite generous number according to Peter. I am sure Peter didn’t take that number out of empty air. Number seven is a sacred or complete number but also signifies a countable number. But to his surprise, Jesus responded that seven times are not sufficient, not good enough, instead Jesus suggested seventy-seven times. In the other gospel says it seventy times seven times. I am not good in number, my wife is; she is an engineer. But what I can tell you seventy-seven times or seventy times seven times is a big number that symbolizes incalculable number. What Jesus is suggesting is forgiveness is more than a complete or perfect number; it must go beyond counting but instead it needs to become an absolute and unlimited.

Jesus’ teaching on forgiveness today is a continuation or conclusion of Jesus’ teaching on how the church ought to deal with conflict from our last Sunday’s

gospel. I think pastor Elisa explained in quite detail last Sunday. Jesus concludes that at the end, only through forgiveness are we able to mend our conflict. Only through forgiveness our broken relationships can be restored and where healing will take place.

Once again the practice of forgiveness that Peter was asking was in the context of the church, a community of faith that Jesus just started. That makes that question also relevant in our church family or faith community. The truth of the matter is that church is not a place for the holy and perfect people. Church is a place for both 'sinners and saints' simultaneously. The church is the place for the sin-sick souls who long for God's mercy and love. The church is also a place where its members learn how to forgive each other over and over again just as God has forgiven us always.

We all know that we don't always agree with each other. Sometimes we get offended or angered when our voice seems undervalued or ignored. Sometimes we are upset because a decision that the council or a committee makes doesn't align with what we like or believe. The church is the body of Christ, where his body consists of many members and each member of the body has different function but when each member of the body function according to its purpose, will make the body strong and thriving and to not forget that Jesus is the head of the body. The apostle Paul mentions this in detail in his first letter to Corinthians chapter 12.

However, when members of the body experience conflict, Jesus offers forgiveness as a remedy and shows us how to do that.

In our gospel today we learn that our motive to forgive should be driven out of our gratitude towards God's forgiveness. We forgive because God has first graciously forgiven us. Jesus puts it into a perspective in his parable today by comparing it to a king who forgave the unsurmountable debt of his slave, 10,000 talents. If 1 talent is equal to 15 years' worth of wages, it will be equal to 150,000 years' worth of wages. There is no way this slave will be able to ever repay that debt even after selling himself, his wife, children and all his possession. But when he asked for mercy, the king granted a full forgiveness of his debt. It should be however, his motive to forgive the debt of his fellow slave who owed him a very little amount of debt, 100 denarii but chose not to. The king said, "*I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me, should you have had mercy on your fellow slave as I had mercy on you?*" Just like Jesus who forgives all our unsurmountable sins and set us free, that we too, should forgive others generously. In the fifth petition of our Lord's Prayer we pray, "*Forgive our sin, as we forgive those who sin against us.*" God's forgiveness should be extended and offered without limit.

Forgiveness however is a choice. It is something that we have to decide to do ourself. It doesn't happen automatically. Often times it is not easy. Especially when the pain is so deep and perpetual. The choice to forgive also requires process and time. And not to choose to forgive in my view is a choice in itself. It is a

decision by default to hold on to anger and resentment that will lead into a deeper sadness and grievances.

The forgiveness that Jesus offers is not a cheap forgiveness either. It is not a 'cheap grace', using Dietrich Bonhoeffer's word. Nor it is an excuse for unjust behavior. And to forgive is not necessarily to forget either. Just like the epic story of Joseph and his brothers in our first reading today. Do you think Joseph forgot all the evil things that his brothers did to him; all the jealousy, envy, resentment that almost took his life and ended up selling him instead and became a slave in Egypt, though later on he rose to power? No, he didn't forget them at all. You may notice it from his response to his fear-stricken brothers, "*Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people as he is doing today. So, have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.*" Joseph chose to forgive. He chose mercy in place of vengeance. He looked at his circumstances from the heavens' eyes, from God's perspective and vision in order to save the lives of many. What a beautiful reconciliation and forgiveness story within siblings. Joseph responded hatred with lovingkindness. Every time I read this, I am moved by that, because I myself experienced such siblings' dynamic within my other seven siblings and I am sure you too experience such bitterness with your siblings or loved ones or perhaps your co-workers.

As Charlotte Dudley Cleghorn said, *“Forgiveness means to release, to let go of the other. Forgiveness is not denying our hurt. When we minimize what has happened to us, gloss over it, tell ourselves that it was not really that bad, we cannot really forgive. Forgiveness is a possibility only when we acknowledge the negative impact of another person’s actions or attitudes in our lives.”* It is a decision to let it go and start a new chapter in our lives for the road towards healing. While our world teaches us to get even, Jesus teaches us to forgive and to forgive always. Forgiveness brothers and sisters in Christ, is not only good for your soul. Medical and scientific studies have shown that forgiveness contributes to one’s health and well-being. Those who hold on to past hurts and resentments will deeply affect their emotional and physical health.

Likewise, only through forgiveness can heal our country from our divisions, hatred, prejudices and political upheavals. If September 11 tragedy united us as a nation, may our present circumstances help unite us through God’s forgiveness. As our Psalmist said, *“How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity! It is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes. It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion. For there the LORD ordained his blessing, life forevermore.”* (Psalm 133).

Thanks be to God.

Amen.