

The Uncertainty of Forgiveness

MATTHEW 18:21-22 (NRSV) *Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?”* ²² *Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.* ~The Word of God for the...

I know people in my generation who've never served on jury duty. I've served four times (just luck, I guess). The only time I sat on a panel, we tried a felony drug case. During the selection process, the prosecuting attorney asked me, "Since you're a minister, I assume you preach forgiveness. How will you be able to reconcile your belief in forgiveness and the possibility of having to find someone guilty of a crime?"

I replied, "Forgiveness does not preclude consequences. That's pardon, not forgiveness, which, as I understand it, is the purview of Presidents, Governors, and, ultimately, of God." Immediately, I wished I'd kept my mouth shut, because I was seated. In retrospect, it was a good experience. It gave me a deeper appreciation for our court system—at least when the defendant is white.

"Forgiveness does not preclude consequences." Can that statement be upheld in Scripture—and especially considering today's passage from Matthew?

Peter's question is set up in the text immediately prior to the passage Bethany read: "*If a brother sins against you, go to him and point out the sin when it's just the two of you. If he listens, you've regained your brother. If he won't listen, go back and take one or two witnesses. If he won't listen, tell it to the church, and if he still won't listen, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.*" (And in our Lenten study Wednesday evening we had a great conversation about how we are to treat "Gentiles and tax collectors.")

So, Peter pipes up: "How many times *should* I forgive; seven times?" The teachings of the rabbis is to forgive a brother three times. Peter doubles it, and adds an extra one, just for good measure.

In our Lenten study, Magrey deVega ponders whether Peter's question simply was an honest seeking for guidance, or was he trying to score "brownie points" with Jesus? There's nothing in the text to suggest either; however, it's a valid question related to our own self-examination—especially during Lent.

But there is a deeper significance to Peter's use of the number, seven. In ancient Middle Eastern numerology, seven signified perfection—completeness. In *Genesis*, God creates the universe in six days, and on the seventh day God rested—the work was complete, and rest was the finishing, perfecting element.

The last book of the Bible begins and ends with a scene of heavenly worship, and in between are letters to seven churches—seven: complete... The whole church. There follow seven visions, each with seven parts, each telling the same story, but with different metaphors and symbols. The message reinforces Jesus' promise, "*In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!*" (JOHN

16:33 NRSV) That message is reinforced seven times.

So, Peter asks, "How many times *should* I forgive; seven times?" And Jesus responds, "Not seven, but 70 X 7!" In numerology, to stack a number is to increase its value exponentially. Daniel's vision in the Hebrew Scriptures involves 70 weeks of years—70 repetitions of 7 days, each day representing a year. The number 6—just shy of seven—represents incompleteness, failure to become or to finish. In Revelation the number is stacked: 666, the mark of the beast—utter, complete, failure to measure up to God's perfection.

"How many times *should* I forgive; seven times?" Several versions say, "How many times *must* I forgive..." and the GNT says, "How many times do I have to forgive..." The syntax clearly suggests limiting forgiveness. We can relate. Forgiveness is hard. "Forgive and forget?" Is that even possible in our litigious culture? Our whole system of justice and fairness is retributive in nature. Is it even desirable to forget? Should we forget 9/11—or the Holocaust—or should we remember, so such atrocities never happen again?

Forgive and forget? Our minds aren't hard drives or thumb drives we can reformat or delete. We can choose to push the hurt to the periphery, so it no longer occupies the center of our lives; but that takes time, and the journey is painful. So, yes. We want the number: how many times must I go through that?

And yet, Jesus' reply is the opposite: forgive without limits.

Why forgive, when it really goes against the grain? Forgive the perpetrators of 9/11? Forgive the ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, or Hitler's extermination of six million Jews? Forgive Jeffrey Dahmer? Forgive Republicans and Democrats for mucking up our nation with their constant disagreeing about everything? And, I don't know about you, but sometimes the hardest one to forgive is myself.

But here's the thing: if we take the Judeo/Christian Scriptures seriously, forgiveness is not an option. So, why is there such a need for forgiveness? And how do we do it when everything in our culture is vengeance centered?

Let's go back to the number: seven. I don't believe it was about numbers to Jesus. Like the ancient Asian metaphor, the numbers are like "fingers that point to the moon." [Our dog, Ginger.]

For Jesus, the number 7 points beyond itself. It represents completion. Perfection. And Jesus stacks the number: forgive 70 X 7 times—forgive without limits. It reflects the creation of God, perfected with that seventh day of rest.

And then humanity got involved and gummed up the works.

Early in my seminary studies I discovered one consistent theme running throughout the Bible. I called it the "Cycle of Redemption," and it describes the

character of God:

1. God creates and establishes a loving, nurturing relationship with humanity—a relationship expressed through a creation that provides all humanity needs to live abundantly...
2. ...humanity spoils it, throwing the whole creation thing out of balance...
3. ...God re-creates by providing a path toward reconciliation and restoration.

In the Jewish understanding creation is still going on. The writer of Revelation reports a vision in which God says, "I am always making all things new." And God's ongoing acts of creation include restoring those elements of creation that humans spoil and break: individual lives and relationships, community life and relationships, and humanity's stewardship of the earth.

God's fundamental nature is revealed in creation, and ultimately in Jesus—the Word become flesh: his teaching, his example, his life of self-giving love—all of which express God's loving work of reconciliation and restoration.

It all is part of the divine revelation of God's identity: God's constant self-disclosure through creation and through history and ultimately through Jesus, and those human moments of epiphany when we "get it," and revelation occurs.

Jesus' response to Peter are fingers that point to God, and this whole forgiveness thing is tied up in this cycle of creation/fall/restoration.

When we humans sin against one another, creation's perfection is spoiled, and through forgiveness, we participate as partners in God's loving restoration.

Richard Rohr has emerged as a prominent leader in contemplative Christianity. In a 2008 book, *Things Hidden: Scripture as Spirituality*, he wrote:

"Up to now, Christianity has largely mirrored culture instead of transforming it. Reward/punishment, good guys versus bad guys, has been the plot line of most novels, plays, operas, movies, and wars. This is the only way that a dualistic mind, unrenewed by prayer and grace, can perceive reality. It is almost impossible to switch this mind during a short sermon or service on a Sunday morning. As long as we remain inside of a dualistic, win/lose script (*what I call a "binary" mind set, using our culture's digital vocabulary*), Christianity will continue to appeal to low-level and vindictive moralisms and will not rise to the mystical banquet that Jesus offered us. The spiritual path and life itself will be mere duty instead of delight, "jars of purification" instead of 150 gallons of intoxicating wine at the end of the party (John 2:6-10). We will focus on maintaining order by sanctified violence instead of moving toward a higher order of love and healing—which is the very purpose of the Gospel."¹

"...a higher order of love and healing..." restoring creation one act of forgiveness at a time. *Prayer Slide*

¹ Adapted from Richard Rohr, *Things Hidden: Scripture as Spirituality* (Cincinnati, Ohio: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2008) p.