

Sermon title: Seventy Times Seven

Matthew 18: 15-22

Beloved followers of our Lord Jesus Christ,

A life long friend betrays a trust; spreading a tidbit of damaging information that was shared in confidence.

A young mother walks out on her husband and their small children, leaving them to fend for themselves.

An employee in a position of trust steals money from the company he is working for.

A husband enters into an illicit affair with another woman, cheating on his wife.

A brother and sister natter at each other as children, and then take this unhealthy dynamic into adulthood where it all boils over in a single cataclysmic encounter. They never speak to each other again.

The stories of broken relationships and dis-function are as many and as varied as the flakes of snow in a winter storm. And everybody has a story.

In the midst of this fractured milieu comes an array of conflicting messages. Depending on who you listen to, we are told to “forgive, or forgive and forget” or “seek justice”. Our culture (speaking to us through its secular mores or dominant values) says that some things cannot be forgiven; some people cannot be redeemed. And yet we read in the Bible that when the disciple Peter asked Jesus, “Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?” Jesus responded by saying, “No, not seven times. But seventy times seven.” Matthew 18: 21-22 (NLT)

Wow! Try forgiving someone seventy times seven. That is, keep on forgiving them time after time after time after time, though they continue to hurt you; though they continue to rub salt into your wounds; though they keep at it with a vengeance. Can that be right? Is that even realistic?

What if the wrong is so egregious, so painful, so hurtful, that it can never be forgotten? If it cannot be forgotten, can it still be forgiven? Or is there some magical cutoff point? Is there some line in the sand, that if crossed, spells the end of forgiveness and the beginning of something else.

And what would that something else look like anyway? Would it look like justice? If so, where do forgiveness and justice intersect? Where do they meet? Can they go hand in hand? Forgiveness and justice? Or is that an Oxymoron? Is that not possible.

And where does redemption fit into the picture? By redemption I mean: where do love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control come into play? Do they come into play? Can there be healing? Can there be closure? Can we somehow move on from a place of emotional turmoil?

These are some of the questions that can be asked by those who have suffered wrongdoing. These are some of the questions that may come to mind when thinking about the pain of relational sins, and the resultant yearning for healing and redemption. These are some of the questions that may have been at the heart of Peter’s question to Jesus, and may also have been at the heart of Jesus’ response.

“Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?” “No, not seven times. But seventy times seven.” Matt 18: 21-22 (NLT)

To understand this exchange, we really ought to look at it in context. Peter was asking his question as a follow up to some teaching Jesus had conducted on matters of relational accountability. Jesus said that if someone sins against you, go and talk to that person in private. Try to settle the matter between the two of you, without involving anyone else. Why? Because that’s really the best way. “If the person listens to you and confesses his sin, you have won him back. In other words, you’ve settled the matter. Its now case closed. He recognizes the problem, agrees with you that it was a problem, that it was a transgression, that it was something he should not have done, or should have done, and he apologizes.

Depending on what it is, he may also offer restitution or compensation in order to make things right. You in turn appreciate the response he gives to you for calling him out on his transgression.

So you forgive him.

There is a mutual common understanding here, and you both move on. More than that, your relationship may in fact grow or become stronger for having worked through the difficulty. This is the best way. That’s why Jesus brings it up first.

And yet it is not the way that is usually taken, is it? As often as not, when we have a difficulty with someone not easily resolved, we keep it to ourselves and let it bottle up inside our hearts. We may try to avoid the problem by avoiding the person, thus never releasing the issue.

Concurrent with an unhealthy avoidance, we may try to relieve the pressure of our inaction by talking about it with other people. We may tell our friends or those in our church or at work about the indiscretion and the hurt that someone has caused us. But again, we don’t talk to the person directly. We talk to others. In so doing we actually entrench the magnitude of the problem by reliving it over and over in our minds and in our conversation. We go around and around, sidestepping the transgressor – talking not with him or her directly, but with everyone else. In a perverse way, then, we also commit an injustice by maligning the reputation and good name of this person with whom we have an issue.

Why do we do this?

Well, there’s probably a myriad of reasons or motivations, enough, I’m sure, to craft another sermon. But we’re not going to focus on that today. Rather, let’s look at what Jesus offered us in this passage as a way past the impasse of hurt in relational conflict. He said, do this. Take these steps. One at a time. First, go speak to the person yourself. And if that doesn’t work, then go to him again with one or two witnesses so that everything you say may be confirmed. And if that still doesn’t work, then approach the church with your issue; ask them to try to deal with it. And if that still doesn’t work, then, and only then, treat the transgressor as a pagan or a tax collector. That is, having nothing more to do with them other than is absolutely necessary. And if you must deal with them, then be careful. Treat them with prudent suspicion.

Now you can imagine Peter’s mind churning as Jesus said these things. He had been hanging around Jesus for a while now, and he knew that there was more to it. It was not just a matter of following the steps like a recipe for angel food cake. You can do all the steps, but if there isn’t an attitude of contrition and graciousness, forgiveness, then it still won’t make a difference. It’s not going to work. So Peter

brought this up. And he did so in a way that let Jesus, the master, know that he, Peter the disciple, was no slouch. He also had a few things figured out. Thus he said, "Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?" If you read between the lines here you might see that what Peter was doing was offering a suggestion to Jesus. He was saying: "Lord, you have indicated time and again that forgiveness is central to your ministry. Shouldn't forgiveness be part of the equation here too then? Maybe there should be more steps in this process that you talked about. Maybe there should be more than just four steps for dealing with someone who has sinned against you. How about steps for forgiveness as well. So Peter suggested, seven. This would have seemed like a gracious number to him. Like something Jesus might suggest.

And it would also have been a logical number to both of them, given their Judaic heritage and cultural references. Seven was the number that represented spiritual perfection. There were seven days in the week. The Lord created the world in six days and rested on the seventh. He made the seventh day holy. As such, there was something complete about the number seven. Something fitting about it.

So how about seven times, Jesus.

Now, I can imagine that Peter believed in offering this idea he might have been reminding Jesus of something that may have been overlooked in his teaching just moments earlier.

But you know Jesus did not overlook anything, least of all forgiveness. And he was about to teach something to Peter that would put it on a whole new level, on a different playing field. He was about to show Peter, that forgiveness is not merely part of the solution, or another step among many in the process. It is, rather, something that acts like a leaven in everything we do. Like yeast in bread or in wine. Like oxygen in the atmosphere. Instead of just being another step toward relational healing, forgiveness needs to permeate the process. It needs to infuse it. It needs to penetrate into the pores and into the cracks and into the far reaches and corners of the relationship. Forgiveness needs to make itself evident everywhere.

This is why Jesus said, "No, not seven times, Peter. But seventy times seven.

Seventy times seven. If you do the math, that's four hundred and ninety times. Now we could read this to mean that Jesus was suggesting we keep on implementing forgiveness for a series of indiscretions or sins just short of five hundred times. And if we believe that, I suppose that's fine.

But really, we might more accurately read this to mean that we should simply be outrageous when it comes to forgiveness. We should be totally over the top about it. Be willing to forgive when no one would expect us to do so.

And I believe Jesus was also suggesting here that we don't bother trying to keep score. By saying, seventy times seven, (or even seventy seven, if that is the interpretation of this passage that you want to use) he was in fact making it very difficult to keep score. It's not about how many times we forgive. Or how many times we can take it on the chin without retaliating. Its not about being pansies or wimps in the face of sin either.

Rather, it's about doing what's best in God's eyes. Doing what's best both in terms of our response to the sin and to the sinner, and in terms of our own internal attitude, in terms of our heart. Because what's best you see; what's best in God's eyes is actually best for everyone, for both the perpetrator of the sin, and for the victim.

There's a very important principle here which is often missed and I'd like to highlight it for a moment. We sometimes think, I believe, that forgiveness is mainly about the perpetrator of a sin. If someone is sorry for having done something wrong, and then seeks and receives forgiveness from those he has hurt; we may see this act of receiving forgiveness as a release from the guilt associated with that sin. And this is indeed true. I don't want to necessarily minimize that result. But what's equally true, and maybe even more true, is that the act of forgiveness also releases the person who does the forgiving, the person who has been wronged. It releases the innocent victim of sin.

This is an amazing facet to the principle of forgiveness. The act of forgiving releases the victim of the sin – even in cases where the perpetrator has not asked for forgiveness, or perhaps is not even willing to acknowledge that he or she has done something wrong.

Forgiveness, you see, is not predicated on a person asking for it. It might be nice, but it doesn't need to have that happen. All it requires is a heart that is ready to forgive. All it requires is a singular act of the will, an act of individual internal discipline or self control.

Self control, as we know, is one of the fruits of the Spirit. And forgiveness, I would submit, is really that – an act in self control. As such there is a rightness about it; a rightness that is ordained by God; a rightness that cannot help but bestow with it a blessing.

Jesus himself was very clear about this blessed aspect of forgiveness for the one who forgives.

In Matthew 6 when he teaches the disciples to pray he says, "forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors. For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your father will not forgive your sins."

Then again in Mark eleven verse 25 he says, "And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins."

In Luke 6 verse 37 he says, "Do not judge and you will not be judged. Do not condemn and you will not be condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven."

Now there are other passages too of course where we are admonished to forgive when a brother or sister seeks forgiveness. But in the passages just referenced, there is no such qualification. We are to exercise forgiveness for sins committed against us regardless of the posture of the perpetrator in respect to that sin. We are to forgive sins against us even when there seems to be no remorse or awareness of wrong-doing on the part of the sinner.

Why is that?

Well, again, it has to do with doing what's right in God's eyes. Recognizing that He sees the big picture. He sees the chain link – how the wheels that are set in motion now have consequences way down the road. He sees the long range panoramic that we can't even begin to imagine yet. He is after all the God

who promises to be faithful to "...a thousand generations (think of that – a thousand generations) of those who love (him)."

Now then, I can imagine someone sitting here this morning, listening to these ideas on forgiveness, and thinking, you know, that sounds very nice. It sounds maybe even spiritual or pious – or maybe even holy. But is it really practical? And isn't there more to it? What about if somebody does something truly terrible, or horrible to you? What if for example somebody murders a member of your family? Are you expected to forgive then? Or are you even able to forgive then?

Well, I think that's a good question. And I don't for a moment begrudge anybody for considering it.

But you know there are examples by way of stories that speak to the answer God would have us give in this regard. Stories that are more powerful than any theoretical considerations; than any "what ifs". I'd like to provide an answer in keeping with what I believe is God's answer to this question, by way of one of these stories now.

This is a story I first read about more than twenty years ago. It's about an elderly black woman in South Africa. She was asked to respond to testimony at a session of the truth and reconciliation commission. If you remember this at all, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was set up by the South African government to foster healing between blacks and whites by offering a venue for people to come clean about atrocities that had been committed during the Apartheid era.

For this elderly lady, the painful memory was of the only two members in her immediate family, her husband and her son, who were both ceremoniously killed in separate incidences. They were murdered. The police officer who was implicated in their executions was a Mr. Van de Broek. He was on the witness stand and recounted how he and other officers shot an eighteen year old boy and then burned his body, turning it on the fire until it was consumed, so that the evidence might be destroyed. Eight years later Mr. van de Broek returned to the same house where they had picked up the boy, and seized the boy's father. The woman, his wife, was forced to watch as policemen bound her husband on a wood pile, poured gasoline over his body and ignited it, despite his pleas for mercy.

One of the members of the commission asked the woman what type of retribution she thought this man should face. What punishment would she want for him.

Understandably, the court room grew quiet as this elderly woman who had first lost her son and then her husband was given a chance to respond. She paused and then said in a quiet voice that she wanted Mr. van de Broek to go to the place where they had burned her husband's body and gather up the dust so that she could give him a proper burial. His head down, the policeman nodded agreement.

Then she added a further request. She said that Mr. van de Broek deprived her of her entire family. And yet she found that she could not sustain bitterness. There was, in fact, a tremendous amount of love left straining for expression within her heart – a love, she said, which also extended to Mr. Van de Broek. Imagine that. So twice a month she would like for him to come to the ghetto, to her house, and spend a day with her. She wanted, she said, to be like a mother to him. And she wanted to do this so that he would know that God forgives him, and she forgives him too. This is what her husband would have wanted as well, she said.

Then, in an amazing offer of restoration and healing, this elderly woman asked that she be allowed to approach Mr. van de Broek on the witness stand. Why? Because she wanted to embrace him, she said. To give him a holy hug. And she wanted to do this so that he would know forgiveness is not merely an idea or words devoid of feelings. She wanted him to know that her forgiveness was real.

The request was agreed to, and as she approached this man who had participated in the killings of both her husband and her son it is reported that his body began to heave with emotion, and it was said by some that he fainted. I don't remember anymore exactly how this all played out; but I do recall that there was a solemn humming by some in the gallery of spectators, and then a joining in with song by others, of the well known hymn – "Amazing Grace!"

People in the gallery humming and singing, Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me."

That, people of God, is forgiveness.

And that's only one story. There are others. Like that of the Amish families whose children were killed in their small school house by a lone gunman in the US back in October 2006. That very night, the night of the day in which their children were murdered, the parents of these children came to the house of the widow of the gunman, to share with her their forgiveness and love, even as they shared with each other the acute raw pain of their mutual grief.

There's the story of the refusal of Otto Frank, in the Netherlands, the father of Ann Frank, to reveal who had betrayed them to the Nazis during the second world war. He said, "...that man may have children. Those children should not have to live with such a thing."

And there are countless other stories that talk of forgiveness in the face of injustice, and speak of forgiveness instead of justice. Not that there is no place for justice. There is. Certainly we read in the Bible that God is a God of justice as well as of mercy and forgiveness. But when it comes to the balancing of justice over against forgiveness – forgiveness is really the more difficult thing, isn't it.

Jesus knew this better than anyone. His life and death on a cross is the supreme example; the most excellent and complete story of forgiveness tempering justice on the face of this earth.

It's the example really for us to follow. The example of how God forgives us for the sins we have committed against him. He forgives us even as we continue to heap scorn and contempt on that forgiveness by way of everything we do that is sinful.

If God were to base his forgiveness on our response, on our willingness to change or on our ability to offer restitution for the damages he has incurred, we'd be in big trouble wouldn't we. We wouldn't be able to do it. We wouldn't be able to deliver.

Good thing its not that way.

Good thing it's not seven times, as Peter would have it; but seventy times seven.

Thank you Lord Jesus.

Let's pray.