

As I was preparing for our message this week, I decided the best way to start this was to pull a David Kopecky on you. SO...

- Did you hear about the math professor who was afraid of negative numbers? He'll stop at nothing to avoid them.
- Why did the students do their multiplication problems on the floor? Because the teacher told them not to use tables.
- I found an odd man to do some work around my house. I had 8 things on his list. When I got home, I found out he'd only done jobs one, three, five, and seven.
- And how about this oldy but goody. Why was six afraid of seven? Because seven eight nine.

Today we take another look at Jesus Math and today's math is no laughing matter. Jesus takes an earnest question from Peter and turns it into an outrageous math equation. How often should we forgive? Today's passage from Matthew is a call to add at least one zero to whatever number you come up with. And don't be all cute and say zero times.

Forgiveness is one of those things we know we "should" do. So why is it talked about so much in the Bible? A form of forgive shows up 120 times in the Christian Bible. In the Old Testament it shows up most in the torah book, Leviticus where it lists all the ways breaking the law can be forgiven. In the New Testament and the Bible as a whole, Luke is the champion of the topic of forgiveness where he mentions it 17 times. You see, Jesus had this annoying habit of first saying he forgave those who need to be healed.

Yes, forgiveness is a hot topic in the Bible. But why is it talked about so much? Because it is one of the most difficult, most complicated, and most courageous thing for us as humans to do.

Forgiveness is something that even the world recognizes as a benefit. Medicine and science teach us that forgiveness is essential for our health and well-being. Doctors and psychologists tell us that holding on to past hurts and resentments affects our emotional and physical health. Unforgiveness increases stress hormones, disrupts sleep, elevates blood pressure, and can even weaken our immune system.

So yes, Jesus will speak urgently about forgiveness, because of what unforgiveness does to individuals and communities.

In our Gospel Lesson for this morning, Peter comes to Jesus and asks, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?” Peter feels smug, Peter feels proud. Peter is a Jew. He knows that according to Jewish law he must forgive someone 3 times. How proud would Jesus be of his suggestion of going so far beyond what the law requires.

And what was Jesus’ response? “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.” GULP!

The NRSV says seventy-seven times, other translations say “seventy times seven.” The Greek isn’t exactly clear about the number Jesus’ used. But His point is unmistakable. “Your forgiveness must be beyond counting. You must forgive every single time.”

Peter wants forgiveness to be measurable, reasonable, something he can keep track of, but Jesus breaks the calculator. He refuses to let forgiveness be a ledger, refuses to let grace be something we spoon out in careful portions.

Forgiveness should not simply be a transaction, it should be a way of living, a way of being. Forgiveness should be a practice shaping the kind of people we become.

But make no mistake. Forgiveness is complicated.

There are times when we simply do not want to forgive. Where we want our revenge. Where we, like Jonah last week, think there are people who just don’t deserve forgiveness. Or at least they better “make it right” first.

That is pride talking. That is forgetting how much God has forgiven you.

This isn’t to say that forgiveness is as simple as the platitude of “forgive, forget, and move on.” If only it were that easy. But that means that we have to pretend nothing happened and that’s not healthy either. Believe it or not, there are some things we should never forget. Like what

happened on 9/11/2001. Hard to believe that 25 years have passed. I truly struggled to forgive the terrorists. I didn't want to do it.

Some things are so horrible that forgetting them would be immoral...the Holocaust, slavery, ethnic cleansing, the exploitation of children, the mistreatment of Indigenous people, abuse, betrayal, lies that turned lives upside down.

You see, forgetting and forgiving are not the same, but forgiveness is still necessary.

Forgiveness does not erase memory, it breaks the power of that memory to control us. It means releasing and letting go.

In her book, "The Way of Forgiveness" Presbyterian minister, writer, and retreat leader, Rev. Dr. Marjorie Thompson says this:

"To forgive is to make a conscious choice to release the person who has wounded us from the sentence of our judgment, however justified that judgment might be. It represents a choice to leave behind our resentment and desire for retribution, however fair such punishment may seem...Forgiveness involves excusing persons from the punitive consequences they deserve because of their behavior.

The behavior remains condemned, but the offender is released from its effects as far as the forgiver is concerned. Forgiveness means the power of the original wound's power to hold us trapped is broken."

There is piece to forgiveness that we don't talk about enough and that's empathy.

There was a man who carried bitterness toward his brother for years. Growing up, they fought, said terrible things to each other. Finally they stopped talking altogether.

One day he found an old letter his brother had written as a teenager. It was full of insecurity, longing, and fear. "I never felt good enough," the letter said. "I always thought everyone was disappointed in me."

After reading this letter, the man said, “For the first time, I saw not the brother who hurt me, but the boy who never felt loved.”

That moment didn’t erase the pain. It didn’t make everything okay. But empathy in that moment opened a door.

But even empathy has limits. You see, empathy can soften the soil, but it cannot grow the tree. Only Christ can do that. Forgiveness happens most fully when human weakness is met by divine strength.

Corrie ten Boom and her family lived in Haarlem, Netherlands during the Nazi occupation. Her whole family was sent to the dreaded Nazi concentration camp, Dachau for trying to save Jewish people during the Holocaust. Corrie was the only one of the four who survived.

She spent much of the rest of her life speaking and witnessing to people about the love and grace of God she had experienced amidst the most horrible experiences imaginable. One night after a speaking engagement at a church, she was startled to recognize a former Nazi S.S. guard who had watched over Corrie and her family members at the camp.

Corrie wrote, “He came up to me as the church was emptying, beaming and bowing. ‘How grateful I am for your message, Fraulein,’ he said. ‘To think that, as you say, Jesus has washed my sins away!’”

Then Corrie wrote, “His hand was thrust out to shake mine. And I, who preached so often to people about the need to forgive, kept my hand at my side. Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. Jesus Christ had died for this man; was I going to ask for more?”

She continued, “I tried to smile, I struggled to raise my hand. I could not.” Corrie could not forgive this man on her own. She could not manufacture forgiveness. She could not will

forgiveness into existence. She could not “try harder.” So she prayed, “Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me Your forgiveness.”

And then Corrie wrote, “As I took his hand...a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this man that almost overwhelmed me.”

It’s been said that every time we forgive someone else, we pass on a drop of water out of the bucketful that God has already given us. We don’t have to forgive out of our own supply. We can forgive out of Christ’s abundant supply.

Unforgiveness is like carrying stones. Every time someone hurts us, we pick up another stone. We tuck them into our pockets, our backpacks, our coats. Eventually we’re hunched over, exhausted, unable to move freely.

Forgiveness doesn’t mean pretending that the stones never existed. Forgiveness means putting the stones down. Not because the harm wasn’t real, but because we were not made to carry it forever. And Christ is the one who gives us the strength to open our hands and put down the stones.

There’s an old story of a prisoner of war who asked another prisoner of war: “Have you forgiven your captors yet?” “I will never do that,” the second one answered. “Then they still have you in prison, don’t they?” replied the first.

When Jesus tells Peter “seventy-seven times,” he is giving him and us the math of God’s economy where grace multiplies faster than harm, where mercy outpaces resentment, where love refuses to be outdone by injury.

He is inviting us into a life where forgiveness is not a rare event but a daily practice, a way of living that keeps our hearts open and our communities in one piece.

There's only one way we can live that way fully. Through Jesus.

Are you carrying stones? Are you keeping ledgers? Are you waiting for an apology that may never come.

Do you need to add some empathy into the soil of your heart to soften it? To prepare that heart so forgiveness can grow?

All of us — every single one of us — we need Christ Himself to do the forgiving through us. Jesus' invitation today is simple, yet impossibly hard: set down one stone. Close one ledger. Release one resentment.

Not because the harm wasn't real, but because Christ wants to give us a future that isn't defined by that harm.

That's Jesus Math. That's the math of the kingdom. That's the math of seventy-seven times or seven times seventy.

That's the math of a God who never stops forgiving, never stops healing, never stops making all things new.

Will you pray with me?

God of grace: I can't forgive on my own. Give me your forgiveness. In Jesus' name and for His sake. Amen.