



*Chaplaincy of All Saints' Marseille
with Aix-en-Provence
and the Luberon*

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15th Sunday after Trinity*

Reflection

"I don't know if there is a sphere of life that will not be positively impacted by being more forgiving," says an American psychologist. Indeed, forgiveness is a topic that has garnered increasing attention in recent years, with a growing body of social science research highlighting its myriad benefits. It has been listed as one of the character strengths that make for a good life and that contribute to human wellbeing, from improved mental health to enhanced relationships.

Researchers have even developed tools like the Forgiveness Likelihood Scale to measure our propensity to forgive in various situations.

In our Gospel passage today, we see Peter approaching Jesus with a question, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Peter seems to have his own Forgiveness Likelihood Scale in mind, seeking a quantifiable limit to forgiveness. However, Jesus responds with a staggering, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."

Peter's question is natural, for we have all experienced the pain of being wronged repeatedly, the sting of consistent affronts. Yet, Jesus' response transcends human scales; he implies that his disciples should embrace a limitless, measureless act of grace.

This is because God operates with extravagant mathematics. In God's economy, one sheep holds greater value than ninety-nine, a widow's small coin surpasses large contributions, and meagre provisions of five loaves and two fish can feed thousands with abundance left over. Similarly, God's forgiveness is mathematically extravagant.

Consider Jesus' parable of the king who forgives a massive debt from a lowly servant, only to have that extravagantly forgiven servant refuse to extend the same grace to a fellow servant in debt. This hyperbole is like a mirror that Christ holds up before us so that we can see our lack of willingness to forgive and compare it with God's boundless mercy.

The Scriptures consistently emphasize the obligation of offering forgiveness repeatedly. Leviticus instructs, "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself" (Lev 19.18). These exhortation follows on from the chronicles of the Patriarchs, which reveal that discord was more common than harmony. But accounts of forgiveness and reconciliation, such as the one between Joseph and his brothers, often culminate in the restoration of fractured relationships.

Yet Scriptures acknowledge that forgiveness transcends the interpersonal; it reaches into the relationship between humanity and God, who, in the word of the Psalmist, is "full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and of great kindness."

So let us not reduce forgiveness to a mere moment of apology and absolution. It is a process infused with grace. Joseph acknowledges his ability to forgive as being God's grace, not his own merit. In contrast, the servant in Jesus' parable, despite being offered an unheard-of outpouring of grace, fails to grasp the power of forgiveness. His refusal to extend this grace to a fellow servant draws him back into a world of debt-keeping and vengeance.

Forgiveness in God's kingdom, points Jesus, is generous beyond limits. Offenders shouldn't be forgiven seven times – already a perfect number – but seventy-seven times, that is, forgiveness should be ingrained in our lives, our default mode, because we are a forgiven people, generously forgiven by God. When we stand in this abundant grace bestowed upon us, our response can only be to pay this wealth of God's forgiveness forward.

So, what does forgiveness that keeps no score entail? Does it imply turning a blind eye to evil and injustice? Certainly not. Today's passage should be considered alongside last Sunday's Gospel reading: the community has a responsibility to confront wrongdoers, support victims, and speak the truth in love.

Forgiveness does not entail ignoring offenses, dismissing the pain of wounds, or advocating for amnesia concerning past injustices. Forgiveness is not about avoiding change or assuming that God's mercy implies indifference to injustice. Instead, forgiveness begins with acknowledging of wrongdoing, recognition of harm. Forgiveness shouldn't lead to passive acceptance or unexamined complicity. - we have a duty to confront systemic evils. We must heed the words of theologian and anti-Nazi dissident Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who cautioned against allowing forgiveness to degenerate into "cheap grace" – that is, forgiveness without the requirement of repentance. Forgiveness should trigger the arduous work of repentance and transformation.

Furthermore, forgiveness should not be conflated with healing or reconciliation. Healing has its own timeframe, and reconciliation may not always be possible. In this sense, forgiveness is not an end; it turns our eyes toward the future. God is present in our story, so we can rest assured that our hurts will not end in brokenness. The journey will unfurl with another chapter, a different path, another grace. From God's abundance, forgiveness can flow through us.

The intricacies of forgiveness extend beyond the frequency or extent of its application. Inherently boundless and immeasurable, forgiveness is part and parcel of God's Kingdom – so it is not an optional item in our “package” as Christ's disciples. Does that make it all the more easy to forgive? Honesty compels us to acknowledge otherwise. Those grappling with forgiveness for reason of circumstance, history, or trauma should not perceive themselves as less spiritually inclined than those who do not. The heartening news is that one can cultivate greater forgiveness. Like any skill, it thrives with dedication and practice. Every good teacher would underscore that practice is very much part of the learning and developing process - Jesus, in his teachings, makes clear that practicing forgiveness is not discretionary – seven times, seventy-seven times ...

Forgiveness may indeed be considered a character strength and virtue. It likely plays a significant part in leading us to more fulfilled and happier lives. It's quite probable that many score higher on Forgiveness Likelihood Scales than I do. Yet, as Jesus reminds us, we all are debtors who receive our Heavenly Father's mercy freely and graciously. Thus, we can take up the hard work of forgiveness for the sake of our world.

May we always pay forward God's healing grace and forgiveness, until justice reigns.

Amen.

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