

“The Heart of the Matter”

“Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?”

Several years ago, Susan and I hosted my Danish cousin Anne Mette and her husband Jens in our home in southern New Jersey. During their stay with us, we took them to Philadelphia to tour many of the historic sights in that city, including Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell (we also introduced them to cheese steaks, a true Philly delicacy). The highlight of that day trip was in the evening when we took them to a Phillies game, the first baseball game they had ever seen. I soon realized that they knew nothing about baseball, since it is not a popular sport in Denmark; so, throughout the game, I attempted to explain the many arcane rules of the national pastime. Both Anne Mette and Jens were fascinated but also very confused by the game; why, for example, are there nine innings and nine players? Why are there three strikes but four balls? Why is a player allowed to “steal” a base, which seemed to them a violation of the rules? Why did everybody stand in the middle of the seventh inning? I cannot say that I always had a good answer to their questions, and soon realized that many of the rules of this game I grew up watching are indeed quite mysterious and arbitrary.

Some numbers that define areas of our life are quite logical: there are four seasons, twenty-four hours in a day, and twelve months in a year. But other numbers seem to have been pulled out of thin air; why, for example, is the express checkout in the supermarket limited to twelve items? Why do hot dogs come in packs of eight while hot dog rolls come in packs of ten? Why are eggs only sold by the dozen? And in today’s gospel lesson, why does Peter choose the number seven as the limit for forgiving someone who has sinned against him?

Peter’s proposal to forgive “*as many as seven times*” sounds extravagantly generous at first, especially since there is no mention of repentance by the offending party (unlike Jesus’ teaching that “*if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive*” – Luke 17:4). Rabbis at this time considered three times to be a sufficient cap on forgiving someone for the same offense. If Peter was aware of this teaching, he may have understood his suggestion of seven times to be quite generous, reflecting Jesus’ own teaching on forgiveness in the Sermon on the Mount: “*For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses*” (Matthew 6:14-15). Forgiving a person seven times also reverses the sevenfold pronouncement of vengeance in Genesis: “*Then the LORD said to [Cain], ‘Not so! Whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance.’ And the LORD put a mark on Cain, so that no one who came upon him would kill him.*” (Genesis 4:15). Peter’s proposal to forgive someone as many as seven times seems to be extravagant, going far beyond what might be expected of someone who has been wronged repeatedly.

Jesus' response is not to commend Peter for his generous proposal but to propose that one go far beyond it in offering forgiveness: "*Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times*" (Matthew 18:22). The Greek number can be translated either "seventy-seven" or "seventy times seven," but is not meant to be taken literally. Jesus is engaging in hyperbole, "*exaggerated statements or claims not meant to be taken literally*" (we engage in hyperbole when we say that we "feel like a million bucks" or "I'm so hungry I could eat a horse"). Jesus' response is far beyond Peter's proposal, and not only in greatly extending the quantity. The difference between Peter's proposal and Jesus' pronouncement is not a matter of math or linguistics, but of the nature of forgiveness. Whoever counts has not been forgiven at all, but is only biding his or her time: "*[Love] is not rude; it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.*" – 1 Corinthians 13:5). The kind of forgiveness called for in the Church of Jesus Christ is beyond calculation:

- "Jesus' response to Peter's question ... takes forgiveness out of the 'countable' category and places it into the realm of the incalculable. The forgiveness to which Jesus points is beyond one's capacity to keep tabs, beyond one's capacity to offer on their own strength or ability. It is God's compassion and abundant mercy that makes forgiveness possible, whether transgressions are large or small." – Audrey West.

Jesus' pronouncement is not meant to limit forgiveness to a high level of either 77 times or 490 times, but to express a boundless willingness to forgive one's brother or sister. As Cain's descendants responded to their enemies with unlimited vengeance ("*If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold*" – Genesis 4:24), so Christians should respond to sins committed against them with a limitless forgiveness.

- "God's kingdom, the forgiveness of sins, has no limit, as the text of the Gospel so beautifully shows when Peter asked his question of the Lord. Jesus answered with a parable in which he earnestly exhorts us, in fear of the loss of God's grace, to forgive our neighbor's trespasses, without any reluctance, because God forgives us such endless sin and guilt. The debt that we owe God is a million dollars, which means that it is infinite. It is so great we would not pay it with all our possessions and with all our powers, for we cannot blot out even the smallest sin. And since God in his kingdom forgives us so much out of sheer grace, we ought also to forgive our neighbor a little." – Martin Luther, 1524.

To illustrate his point about unlimited forgiveness, Jesus shares a parable which again trades in hyperbole, centering on a king and one of his servants who owes "a myriad of talents," which would have sounded like infinity to Jesus' audience, an amount no person could ever repay. When the king discovers that this servant cannot repay this extravagant debt, "*his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and all his possessions, and payment to be made*" (18:25). The enslaving of debtors was practiced in both the ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman worlds ("*Now the wife of a member of the company of prophets cried to Elisha, 'Your servant my husband is dead; and you know that your servant feared the LORD, but a creditor has come to take my two children as slaves.'*" – 2 Kings 4:1). When the servant pleads with the king to spare him this fate, "*out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt.*" (18:27). In an outrageous act of generosity and mercy, the king graciously forgives this unforgiveable debt.

We would expect that the servant who has been liberated from such an onerous debt would show his gratitude by extending such forgiveness to others; but sadly, this is not what happens. The king's mercy stands in sharp contrast to the forgiven servant's harshness when he demands that a fellow servant pay a debt owed to him: *"But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him by the throat, and said, 'Pay what you owe. '"* (18:28). But even though the debt owed to him is 600,000 times smaller than the debt he has just been forgiven, the forgiven servant refuses to extend the same generous forgiveness even though his fellow servant adopts the same physical position and begs for time to repay his debt. Instead, *"he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt"* (18:30). The other household servants are understandably outraged by this shocking lack of forgiveness and gratitude, and they soon report all of this to the king, who summons the ungrateful servant and now pronounces a much different fate:

- *"You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?"* And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until she should pay his entire debt." – 18:32-34.

The servant who received the most extravagant forgiveness now receives the most severe punishment. The king delivers him up to "the torturers" (who were often found in Roman prisons) until he paid the entire debt – which, in effect, was never. The unforgiving servant has brought this fate upon himself, because while the king *"has granted his servant a level of forgiveness that exceeds imagination and yet, that servant is unwilling to offer even the smallest mercy to another person"* (West). Jesus concludes his parable with a warning to his listeners that *"so my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."* (18:35). It is an illustration of the petition Jesus teaches in the Lord's Prayer, when we pray that God *'forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us'* (6:12); as God has forgiven us without limit, so should we extend the same extravagant forgiveness to others:

- *"We ask in this prayer that our heavenly Father would not regard our sins nor deny these petitions on their account, for we are worthy of nothing for which we ask, nor have we earned it. Instead we ask that God would give us all things by grace, for we sin daily and indeed deserve only punishment. So, on the other hand, we, too, truly want to forgive heartily and to do good gladly to those who sin against us."* – Small Catechism.

Jesus' teaching contains aspects of both law and gospel, which is how the Word of God is always spoken to us: it is the gospel of extravagant forgiveness, that God indeed does forgive us our debts that we could never repay through Christ's *"holy, precious blood and his innocent suffering and death"* (Small Catechism), and the commandment that we must forgive others as we have been forgiven, as Jesus commands his disciples to *"love one another as I have loved you"* (John 15:12), so we as God's people must forgive one another as we have been forgiven. As one who *"does not love does not know God, for God is love"* (1 John 4:8) so one who does not forgive cannot truly be walking as a child of God, for forgiveness is the heart of the matter for God's people; forgiveness is at the heart of the Gospel of Jesus Christ upon which the Church is built and through which the Church exists and serves.

- “Jesus calls his disciples to a very high standard of mercy. We cannot speak words of forgiveness while harboring resentment … if we remember how much God has forgiven us then we can avoid becoming like that unforgiving servant who, though he was forgiven much, failed to forgive others. We can also pray for the person who hurt us and try to see beyond their harmful acts and to consider their own sorrowful condition. Hence, ‘the heart that offers itself to the Holy Spirit turns injury into compassion and purifies the memory in transforming the hurt into intercession (Catechism of the Catholic Church 2843).’ – Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri.

Many of us have experienced the damage that is caused when forgiveness is not offered and experienced in human relationships. My grandmother’s family suffered from the decades-long feud between her two brothers, who died before they were able to forgive each other from whatever transgression kept them separated. Offenses that are not addressed can lead to separations in communities that build barriers of separation that often are never overcome. Too many congregations have become divided and eventually close because members of the community fail to live up to Jesus’ teaching to forgive as we have been forgiven, to extend the same graciousness to others that we have received so extravagantly from our Lord who showers the grace of God upon us *“out of pure, fatherly goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all!”* (Small Catechism). When we fail to extend the same forgiveness to others that we have received from God, we are often the ones who suffer the consequences such a lack of grace.

- “As C.S. Lewis put it, ‘To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you’ … I believe Jesus gave us these stories about grace in order to call us to step completely outside our tit-for-tat world of ungrace and enter into God’s realm of infinite grace.” – Philip Yancey, *What’s So Amazing About Grace?*

Grace, forgiveness, and reconciliation are “the heart of the matter” for the Church which is the body of Christ. As we have been reconciled to God through Jesus Christ, so are we called to bring this gift of reconciliation to others: *“All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.”* (2 Corinthians 5:18-19). As our Lord did not keep an account of our sins and transgressions but forgives us without limit, so also must our message of reconciliation not be one in which we keep a count of the number of times we forgive, but be willing to forgive “seventy-times seven,” a loving forgiveness that is an appropriate response to the limitless love that is *“so amazing, so divine, [that] demands my soul, my life, my all”* (ELW Hymn 803).

- “Reconciliation is at the heart of life’s business. If the most important single factor about any of our lives is God’s having reconciled us to God’s very self, then the proper celebration of our reconciliation is to share it with others by fostering reconciliation and atonement wherever and whenever we can … Reconciliation as the ground of life would mean that when your friend makes some negative or judgmental comment about a neighbor, you will resist joining in. Indeed, instead you might respond by noting something you have appreciated about the same neighbor. Thus, you may help two of your acquaintances come to understand each other better.” – J. Paul Sampley.

Forgiveness is “the heart of the matter” for Christians, the very essence of our witness to the good news of the extravagant, limitless, unconditional love of God in Jesus Christ. But forgiveness is not easy for us – in fact, forgiving another person who has wronged us or someone we love is a most *unnatural* act. It is natural for us to want to protect our selves and those to whom we are responsible; it is natural for us to respond in kind to the actions of another. Vengeance is easier than forgiveness; revenge is more enticing than reconciliation. Yet as we were unable by our own understanding or strength to believe in Jesus Christ our Lord or come to him, and as we were unable to reconcile ourselves to God apart from the death and resurrection of Christ, so also are we unable to forgive others or to be reconciled to others apart from the blessings of the Holy Spirit who empowers us to “*accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine*” (Ephesians 3:20). Empowered by the Holy Spirit, we can offer the “*grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit*” so that we might forgive as we have been forgiven and love as God first loved us.

- “The gospel of grace begins and ends with forgiveness. And people write songs with titles like ‘Amazing Grace’ for one reason: grace is the only force in the universe powerful enough to break the chains that enslave generations. Grace alone melts ungrace.” – Yancey.

I am not sure if Anne Mette and Jens became baseball fans (they did, however, love the cheese steaks!) but they helped me to see the game in a different light, how the numbers that rule baseball may appear arbitrary to outsiders. Many of the numbers that guide our lives and actions are not as essential as we may believe; keeping count does not have to be the defining mark of our relationships. Forgiveness and reconciliation are not a numbers game, because at the heart of the matter for Christians is the limitless love of God that never keeps a count, never has an upper limit, never tires of forgiving and reconciling. The heart of the matter for Christians is the amazing grace that loves us and always welcomes us home; it is the love that is always at the heart of a Church which truly lives as a reconciling community, welcoming others as we have been welcomed by our extravagantly loving God.

Amen.