



## **Pentecost 16 (A) – Proper 19**

**[RCL]: Exodus 14:19-31; Psalm 114 or Exodus 15:1b-11,20-21; Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35**

### **How Many Times?**

Peter asks Jesus about the number of times we must forgive. We know from our Gospel stories that Peter was very human and made lots of mistakes. He had a tendency to blurt things out and wear his heart on his sleeve. In fact, some Episcopalians might shy away today from this rough, gritty fisherman who became the head of the church. He was childlike in his honesty and was always direct with Jesus. It's likely there was someone that Peter was peeved with, for him to ask this seemingly simple question.

The answer he gets is profound and troubling to us all. Jesus answers him seventy-seven times, (or seventy times seven in some translations). If we are truly honest with ourselves and one another, none of us really want to be told to forgive those who have hurt us terribly.

The number seven, which Peter suggests, is considered completeness or enough in ancient biblical traditions. Jesus answers him that forgiving count-less times is never enough and goes on to share a story about the kingdom of heaven. I imagine Peter wanted to be done with forgiveness more quickly; maybe he even was disappointed by the answer he got. True forgiveness, like true faithfulness, is a huge amount of work—but not impossible.

Jesus gives us a sense of what this forgiveness looks like by teaching about the kingdom of heaven. Readers may think that Jesus is speaking of a time in heaven to come: the afterlife and the great reward. But when Jesus refers to the kingdom of heaven, Jesus is talking about the here and now. The kingdom of heaven—Jesus's way, the way of love—is a realm of compassion and kindness, a reign of love and forgiveness. It is breaking out at all times and in all places in our world. Yet, if we are honest, we might only rarely experience love, forgiveness, compassion, and kindness in this world of ours. It is our work as disciples of

Jesus to bring the kingdom of heaven forth as we love and forgive. And loving and forgiving is a tough job, a heavy responsibility.

We are now deeply in the long season after Pentecost, the time of simple life lessons that become more and more complex, as we move towards Advent. We are also deep in football season, whether you follow high school, college or professional sports, or no football at all. Football teams have rivalries, teams that are their most vile enemies and their fans are reviled along with the players. Even in a realm as remote as football, we can recognize the universal truth that we have a hard time liking, let alone forgiving, people who we see as rivals. When we see people as the other—different from us—they might be impossible to understand and even less worthy of forgiveness when a breach comes. Whether it's football or politics, we have so much that divides us. The kingdom of heaven can seem very distant in our present lives.

Let's look at another teaching. Jesus tells us a story about a man who owed a ridiculous amount of money and couldn't pay it. He begged for mercy, and was forgiven that huge, impossible debt. He might have been grateful; he might have been humbled. Instead, forgiven of his own debt, he turned and tormented those who owed him a mere pittance. He may have received mercy, but he destroyed the lives of his debtors with his own lack of mercy and forgiveness.

Jesus reminds us that the kingdom of heaven, here among us, is ushered in by forgiveness and gratitude. Without gratitude we can become petty and selfish, thinking we have created our own mercy and forgiveness. The mercy of God invites us to be moved by compassion for one another, to see the ache in another's eyes, to forgive them—as we are forgiven—for their human failings.

You may have seen on social media the viral trend of “the get along shirt.” When children are fighting, parents put them in one enormous shirt, effectively forcing proximity: tying them together until they can resolve their differences. Other parents might take more modest strategy: make the kids hold hands or stay in the same room until they apologize to one another and forgive each other. Forced apologies and shallow forgiveness, of course, do not take us very far. We can hold onto resentment and pain across a lifetime. Real forgiveness asks that we dig down deep and release the anger, revenge, and violence we hold in our hearts. The prophet Micah reminds us that the kingdom of heaven here on earth requires us to “do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8).

Here then is an answer to how we participate in the kingdom of heaven here on earth. Mercy, love, justice, kindness, and forgiveness are all gifts from God. These are the signs and symbols of God's living presence with us. God is calling us today to live a life of forgiveness.

At the end of the beatitudes, Jesus reminds us of a first step. He instructs his listeners: “leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.” (Matthew 5:24) Imagine if we took this direction seriously—would people be dashing out of church all the time, returning reconciled? Would there be a stampede to forgive and reconcile? Instead, most of us sit in the pews, heavy with unresolved, unforgiven strife in our hearts. God is calling us *today* to live a life of forgiveness.

The good news of our gospel today is that the love of God is the beginning and end of our lives. Over and over, we are forgiven by God. Not seven times seventy, but endlessly. God’s love precedes us, is beside us, surrounds us, and leads us home. Our call, our response, is to live as forgiven people, forgiving others and ourselves. We usher in a taste of God’s reign, the kingdom of heaven, as we let go of the resentments and anger we have been carrying. We are called today to be those beacons of hope and mercy, so others may find their way in our violent and divided society. Paul reminds us, “We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s (Romans 14:8). Such forgiveness is not something we do alone, but in community. As we model forgiveness, we receive abundant forgiveness and help others see God’s mercy working in their lives.

Okay, so how do we do it? How do we become the people of forgiveness and mercy in the fractured world? We start by forgiving ourselves. God forgives you, so forgive yourself. And when you accept our own flawed humanity, you will notice that others around you are also human—as prone to failing as you are—and compassion grows.

In the eighteenth century, the Atlantic slave trader, John Newton, was caught in a terrible storm at sea. This storm brought him to his knees, praying to survive the storm. He found Jesus, tasted forgiveness, and later wrote the immortal words to “Amazing Grace” that we still sing today. The Cherokee people, walking across the country from the southeast to Oklahoma Indian territory along what is called the Trail of Tears, sang these words as they were herded along: “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me!” (Hymnal 1982)

Today, we are invited to start living a life of forgiveness and gratitude. We can take small steps, one at a time, letting anger go and accepting forgiveness. We might need to make some apologies of our own. May we find ourselves in the days to come, singing with honesty and gusto Newton’s wonderful hymn, and living lives of forgiveness that usher in a taste of the kingdom of heaven. *Amen.*

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