

“How high can you count?” asked one child. “I can count to 10.” Said the other child. “Well, I can count to 100.” Said the first. “I can count to 1000!” said the second. “Dad, how high can you count they asked in unison.” “Well,” said the father, “I’m not exactly sure, but yesterday... I counted to infinity...twice.” The children paused and thought about that, and responded, “That’s not possible dad!”

The point of that joke is to make light of the effort to quantify the unquantifiable. I know my family is tired of hearing me tell this but it has caused me to think about what in life is *actually quantifiable*. I know how much the price of gas is.. it’s a lot. I know how much my mortgage is, it’s a lot. I know that I feel better when the Tar Heels score more points than whoever they are playing... which happens... sometimes, so there are some things I can quantify but there are a lot of things that I can’t really quantify.

For example, I can’t explain with math or science why or how much I love my wife or my children. I can’t quantify how happy I am to be in this community here at St. John in the Wilderness, and I can’t truly explain why I know in every fiber of my being that God loves me, that God loves you, and that God all of us here today. I know it, we know it.

Yet we always want to know the answer to the question “how much” don’t we? We want to know the answer, how much do I need to give, how much am I supposed to take, how long will I have to endure ...this, whatever “this” is. These are questions that have been asked since, well, *forever*. Jesus’ friends had the same questions and in our lesson from the Gospel according to Matthew they asked about how often we, as followers of Christ are asked to forgive.

“How often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus answered Peter, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.”

Forgiveness, for Jesus, is not a quantifiable event. It is a quality; it is a way of being, a way of living, a way of loving, a way of relating, a way of thinking and seeing. It is nothing less than *the way of Christ*. So, in terms of forgiving, if we are to follow Christ then it must become our way as well. “Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times.”

Does that mean we forgive the drunk driver that killed our friend in high school? Yes it does. Does that mean we are called to forgive the cheating spouse? Yes. The lying businessman? Yes. The racist or homophobe? Yes. The rapist? Yes. The bully? Yes. The abusive parent? Yes. The greedy corporation? Yes. Even the terrorists of 9/11?... Yes.

We often exist in a seemingly impossible if not at least an extremely difficult place. We stand at the intersection of the anniversary of the September 11th tragedy, of countless violent events in our world and today's gospel. The memories, the images, the anger, the fear, the pain, and losses all intersect with Jesus's teaching on forgiveness. Both pain and forgiveness are real. Both are true.

The deeper truth, however, is that we would still be standing at the same intersection even if the attacks on September 11th had never occurred. We stand at that place every day of our life. Look at the history of the world and you will see the Holocaust, the Killing Fields of Cambodia, the genocides in Bosnia and Rwanda, racial discrimination, economic oppression, wars and torture in Afghanistan, Iraq, Ukraine and... really not all that long ago, really terrible things right here.

Look at your own lives and you will find broken promises, hurt feelings, betrayals, harsh words, physical and emotional wounds. Every one of us could tell stories of being hurt or victimized by another. Beneath the pain, the wounds, the losses, and the memories lies the question of forgiveness.

Everyone, I reckon, is in favor of forgiveness, at least in principle. In one of my all-time favorite books *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis writes, “Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea... until there is something to forgive” So then, what do we do? What do we do when there is something or someone to forgive?

Some will strike back seeking revenge. Some will run away from life and relationships. Some will let the darkness paralyze them. Now, I don’t say that out of criticism or judgment of somebody else, but I say this out of my own experience. Sometimes I feel like I have seen it all. Sometimes I feel like I have had it all done to me, and sometimes I feel like I have done it all to others. I know how hard forgiveness can be. I reckon that many of you can relate to what forgiveness actually looks like, it is hard to do even one time. How much, how often are we called to forgive?

Like you, I also struggle with forgiveness and often avoid it. The answers, the place I often come to, is a place that maybe makes me feel justified... it makes me feel like I am *right*. Screw that person, those people, that way of thinking or being. I’m right, they’re wrong, that’s it, over and done with. Yet, I also know that none of those answers that way of thinking or being are the way of Christ.

That way of being leaves me, it leaves us *stuck in the past*, tied to *the evil of another*, and *bereft of the future God that wants to give us*.

So where do we go? We go in the way of Christ and forgiveness is the only way forward. Now that certainly does not mean we forget, condone, or approve of what was done. It does not mean we ignore or excuse cruelty or injustice. It means we are released from them. We let go of the thoughts and fantasies of revenge. We look to the future rather than the past. We try to see and love as God sees and loves. Forgiveness is a way in which we align *our life with God's life*. To withhold forgiveness is to put ourselves in the place of God, the ultimate judge to whom all are accountable. Our brother in Christ, Paul, speaks of this in his letter to the Romans.

“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. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.”

Paul goes on to write, “Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written,

"As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me,
and every tongue shall give praise to God."

So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

God's forgiveness and human forgiveness are fundamentally related. That is more than apparent in today's parable. The king forgives his slave an extraordinary amount. Ten thousand talents is... adjusting for inflation, about 3000 years of work at the ordinary daily wage. For this person it seems there is no debt too large to be forgiven. This person, this debtor, was forgiven. That's what the kingdom of heaven is like. That's how our God is. This slave, this human being, however, refused to forgive his fellow slave 100 denarii, about three months of work at the ordinary daily wage. Too often that's what our world is like. Frequently, that is how we are. In that refusal the forgiven slave lost his own forgiveness.

This should not be news to us. We know it well. We acknowledge and pray it every Sunday and I'll guess that many of us pray it every day. "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." We pray those words with ease and familiarity, but do we actually live our prayer? Do our actions support our request? "How often should I forgive" Peter asks. "How often should I forgive" I reckon we ask. Christ responds. "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." Matthew doesn't write it, and Jesus doesn't say it, but I reckon God would say... infinity, twice.

That's a lot of forgiveness but the pain of the world, our nation, and individuals is great. So then, we need to forgive as much, maybe even more, for ourselves as for the ones we forgive. Forgiving those who trespass against us is the salve that begins to heal *our* wounds. It may not change the one who hurt you, but I promise you this. Your life will be more alive, more grace-filled, more whole, more God-like for having forgiven another.

Forgiveness creates space for new life. Forgiveness is an act of hopefulness and resurrection for the one who forgives. It is the healing of our soul and life.

Forgiveness takes us out of darkness into light, from death to life. It disentangles us from the evil of another. It is the refusal to let our future be determined by the past. It is the letting go of the thoughts, the hatred, the fear that fills us so that we might live and love again.

So how do we begin to forgive? There is no easy road to forgiveness. Don't let anyone tell you, "Just give it up to God. Forgive and forget." Simplistic trite answers only demean those who suffer and pick at the wound. Forgiving another takes time and work. It is something we must practice every day. It begins with recognition and thanksgiving that *we have been forgiven*. We are the beneficiaries of, Christ Jesus, God Incarnate, *the crucified one*.

Hanging on a wooden cross between two thieves Christ lifted a prayer to God, “Father, forgive them”. That is the cry of infinite forgiveness, a cry we are to echo in our own lives, in our families, in our workplaces, in our parishes, in our day to day life.

Forgiveness does not originate in us. It begins with God. That’s what the slave who refused to forgive didn’t understand. It was not about him. It’s about God. We do not choose to forgive. We only choose to share the forgiveness we have already received. Then we chose again, and then again, and then *yet again*. For most of us forgiveness is a process that we live in to. Sometimes, however, we just can’t. The pain is too much, the wound too raw, the memories too real. On those days we chose to want to forgive. Somedays we chose to just to want to forgive. Then there are those days that all we can do is choose to want *to want to want to* forgive. But we choose because *that is the choice* that Christ made.

How many times must we choose to forgive? Tell me this. How many times have you been hurt and suffered by the actions or words of another? How many times has anger or fear controlled you? How many times has the thought of revenge filled you? How many times have you shuddered at the sight, the name, or the memory of another? How many times have you replayed in your head the argument with another?

That is how many times we choose. And, with each choice we move a step closer to forgiveness. Then, we hope, and we pray, one day, God willing, we will meet, all of us together, victims and perpetrators, all of us, happy in the paradise of God, the Father of us all. So how often should I forgive?

“Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.” Perhaps even infinity, twice.