

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost A  
 September 17, 2017  
 Not Fair!: The Math of Forgiveness  
 Central Presbyterian Church, Montclair  
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This will be the first in a series of sermons for this fall with the title “No Fair!” We will follow the lectionary as it confronts us with some of the harder lessons of being a community that follows in the steps of Jesus.

## INTRO

In today’s gospel lesson we hear Jesus teaching his disciples. Jesus says:

- Be more like children- humble and vulnerable
- Don’t make other believers stumble
- Take care of each other, like the shepherd who leaves the flock behind in order to find and rescue the one lost sheep
- Handle your church conflicts like this:
  - tell someone when they have hurt you
  - if necessary take a friend along so they will listen
  - finally, if you need to, bring the whole congregation together to help you settle your difference

*Then Peter came and said to him(Jesus), ‘Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.*

*‘For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.” And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, “Pay what you owe.” Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you.” But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow-slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, “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 he should pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.’(Matthew 18.20-35)*

1.

Thank God for Peter, the one who is impulsive and vulnerable and questioning- the one who speaks up and says what everyone else is thinking. "OK, Jesus, you tell us to confront the one who has sinned against us and if they don't care or want to listen, to take a friend a long so they will. And if the problem persists, to bring the whole church in on it so it can be resolved. Just how often are we to do that? How about seven times," Peter says.

That's a good, Biblical number. And it more than satisfies the Old Testament law that says we should avoid vengeance and not hold grudges, but love our neighbor instead. Peter is being generous with seven. That's a lot of times to forgive someone in a church, or anywhere else.

But Jesus throws out the numbers altogether when he says seventy seven times. You can't count forgiveness on your fingers. You just keep doing it.

2.

Wow. That's hard. Forgiving just once is hard, but over and over and over again?

There is a true story about a congregation and their organist with whom they could not get along. They had trouble getting their arms around forgiveness. It was easier to complain behind the organist's back, to be passive/aggressive, to deny there was anything wrong while they seethed privately with resentment. So they threw a retirement party for the organist, hoping she would get the hint. But she did not. Finally they solved their problem...by selling the organ.

Forgiveness is hard. Especially when we are hurt and the other party is not bothered by our injury. And whenever we are reminded of the word or the action that hurt us and it never seems to go away. It's hard to forgive. And it's hard to hear Jesus blow up the math of reasonable forgiveness. And it's hard to have him command us to do it. He expects it with us.

3.

Jesus tells a parable about forgiveness. A wild, exaggerated, bigger-than-life parable about a king and his servants. The first servant owes the king 10,000 talents of silver. A talent is a weight of 130 pounds. No one could owe 10,000 talents of silver to anybody. It's extreme, to make a point. And when the servant begs the king to let him try to pay it back (could never happen!) the king, out of pity for the servant, cancels the entire bazillion dollar debt. And then that same servant finds another servant who owes him a few hundred dollars and when he begs for mercy, the first servant throws him into prison. The king finds out and hauls the first servant back into court and berates him for his unmerciful attitude and throws him into jail to have him tortured until he pays his bazillion dollar debt back to the king (in other words, never). And Jesus sums it up by saying God will do the same to you if you do not forgive others.

But not exactly. Jesus is exaggerating to make his point about forgiveness. This is how important forgiveness is to him and to the church and to the kingdom of God. He grabs our attention with an outlandish story so we will hear what he has to say.

But I don't think he is answering Peter's question. In the parable there is nothing said about how often we should forgive others. What Jesus does say is that the servant was forgiven a debt he had no hope of repaying. And he did not react. He did not rejoice. He did not say, "Thank you." He did not show gratitude. He lived as if he did not know what forgiveness was.<sup>1</sup>

I think that's the point Jesus is making. I think he's asking, "Are you aware you have been forgiven by God for everything?" It's not that the servant didn't forgive his fellow servant, but that he never embraced the unbelievable forgiveness and mercy and grace he had been given.

We ask how we can possibly forgive someone when the starting line is really how much God has forgiven us. I need to remember that.

We are free. We have been released. Could this be what Jesus is trying to tell Peter and us? Start with being forgiven and work it out from there.

4.

This year is the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation when the Presbyterian Church was born. Martin Luther instigated the Reformation with his re-discovery of God's forgiveness. He had always thought it was his responsibility to make things right with God. When in reality God took on the responsibility to make things right with us through Jesus Christ. Luther realized that God loves those who are hard to love. Before anything else, it is God who forgives and makes right. So, Luther declared, with God's forgiveness we are free from our burden and free to imagine new possibilities.

Let's start with Luther.

Let's wonder about the forgiveness of God. How does God do it? How is such forgiveness for us possible? We wonder because while it is hard for us, it is possible for God.

We struggle with forgiveness, but apparently that is not the last word. Forgiveness interrupts what we think is automatic, habitual, even inevitable. With God's forgiveness in your life and mine, things don't have to be the way they are.

In a few minutes I'm going to ask you to say together the Apostles' Creed because in it we say, "I believe in the forgiveness of sins."

Before we try to forgive, let's profess that we are forgiven, and new possibilities lie before us.

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<sup>1</sup> From David Lose. Pentecost 15A *Forgiveness and Possibility*. <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/09/pentecost-15-a-forgiveness-possibility/>