

Times are tough, and many hearts can harden. We hear of short fuses in families, and insults and attacks in society, and of course the incessant beating of war drums. You would think our common health risks and fears could bring people together! When life is so difficult, the highest calling for Christians, and anyone of any faith or good conscience, is to view and treat one another with compassion and kindness. In our Gospel lesson this morning (Matthew 18:23-35), we hear the centrality of **Forgiveness** (7 time 70 Jesus tells Peter, meaning complete and without limit), the “Wideness of God’s **Mercy** (including all kinds of people)” and the Amazing **Grace** of God and Christ (forgiving such a huge debt of “10,000 talents,” which scholars say was greater than the budget of an entire province!)

First of all, let’s admit that forgiveness is hard to achieve. Maybe the word I just used is a key: we can’t actually “achieve” forgiving others with effort and will power. One lady in my mother’s prayer group would say over and over, It is just so hard to forgive! Wounds fester, resentments cling, and grudges are held. We don’t easily “forget” injuries done to us, nor should we have to. But the power of that hurt and the level of anger can be reduced over time, with a focus on Mercy and Grace, a reception of Forgiveness inside ourselves: self-forgiveness, self-love, self-compassion.

In our Gospel readings, Jesus is quite clear about the importance of mercy, forgiveness. In his stories or “parables,” He tells of the tax collector who is humble, knows he is an imperfect “sinner,” and asks for God’s Mercy. Jesus praises that tax collector. Also in the parable about the King and his servants, he affirms the first servant who “fell on his knees” asking for mercy from his King. The King grants his request, and forgives a huge debt. Yes indeed! Forgive us our “debts” as we forgive our debtors, as Jesus teaches in the Lord’s prayer.

The second part of the parable is more difficult, when the king takes back his forgiveness because the servant would not forgive a fellow servant, but takes him by the throat and makes him pay all. It does seem very strange for “the King” to take back Mercy after having given it. So Jesus teaches not only the Divine ideal, to forgive 7 times 70, but Jesus teaches the reality of life: You must forgive in order to be forgiven. If you have an unforgiving spirit toward others, you will not receive forgiveness either. I like to think of it as a “milieu,” an environment of giving and receiving. If your reality is hard-heartedness (pay up or be punished), this unforgiving spirit is both given and received; it is your milieu and your experience of life. Similarly, if your heart is tender, forgiving, gracious to others, it has often experienced forgiveness, grace, tenderness toward self. A simple proverb says it another way: what goes around comes around! **Kindness breed kindness.** Love breeds love. And hardened unforgiving, punishing hearts encourage other hearts to harden, to not forgive, even to punish.

A simple example of cycles of kindness or cycles of violence is behavior on the roads. If I get let into traffic a few times, I get the idea, and start graciously waving on someone else who is waiting forever to make a left turn. On the other hand, if I have been honked at or sworn at for some little mistake in traffic rules, how tempting to blare my horn, punishingly, at the next person who cuts in front of me wrongly, or dilly dallies in the wrong lane confused about whether to turn or not! Kindness begets kindness and punishment begets punishment! And we know that these cycles can escalate, in this case, from blaring horns to road rage, to even chasing or ramming that other car!

And so go these cycles, from relationships with friends and family, all the way to international relationships. The unforgiving heart, the punishing heart, has and will experience punishment, retaliation and vengeance in return. But the forgiving heart, the heart that

forgives generously, even 7 times 70, will also experience the Divine forgiveness, the spirit of Grace, expressed in the environment or milieu of all relationships.

I propose that the “wicked” slave in the story did not truly experience the forgiveness of his huge debt, and so he could not pass along debt-forgiveness to another. We could interpret that the “wicked slave” made a show of religiosity, that falling on his knees was all a show, that his heart was not contrite or humble at all. Rather, his heart showed its true colors when he was merciless to his fellow servant who owed him a very small amount.

During pandemic times and political warfare, everyone is suffering, on edge in some way. Yes, fuses are short, regrettable words are said. So our highest calling, again, is for compassion, love, forgiving one another as God seeks to forgive us. To err is human, yes. (I love the little saying that shows up on coffee table coasters: “I never make the same mistake twice; I make it 5 or 6 times, just to be sure!”) To err is human, and to forgive is “Divine” is such a true saying.... As forgiving really is beyond our normal efforts; our natural tendency is to retaliate, to get revenge. So being able to forgive must be a divine gift, from beyond, a gift of grace.

We can try helpful techniques, however. At the personal level, one well known technique for developing a more forgiving heart, a more loving or compassionate heart, is to recognize that every person has a “child within” that still has weaknesses, that needs comfort, guidance, forgiveness. Even Jesus had his growing edges, as Luke reports that he “grew in wisdom and stature.” Jesus went off by himself to pray and called God his Heavenly “Father.” Surely Jesus was refining his divine approaches to the world; he may have even asked his Heavenly Father for “forgiveness” at some point for his inability to reach some people, or for having limited vision as a child or adolescent or young man (remember how he told the Syro-Phoenician or Canaanite woman that his mission was to the children

of Israel, and it was not fair to give bread to the “dogs?” (Mt. 15:26) ... And how that woman made Jesus change his mind by saying “even the dogs get some scraps from under the table!” He then granted her a healing. Some commentators say that Jesus was just “testing her,” but I’m more comfortable with saying that it was an example of Jesus “growing in wisdom,” as Luke states at the end of chapter 2.

Another method of receiving divine forgiveness is to identify with the writer of Psalm 131, who says “I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother.” This is the kind of comfort and forgiving spirit that mothers give to let children know that whatever mistake they have made, this too shall pass, things will be OK, and they are forgiven and can be at peace.

Can you recall for a moment someone who has hurt you? And can you recall a time when you hurt someone else? (It matters not if intentional or non-intentional)...(silence)... Now can you imagine Jesus, or God as loving parent, coming alongside and forgiving you, and perhaps offering a lap and embracing arms to comfort you?

Finally, let’s imagine and meditate on the “Ultimate” level of forgiveness shown by Jesus on the Cross: “**Father, forgive them, for they KNOW NOT what they do.**” This is forgiveness when there is no apology, even no recognition of hurt. In prayer, we can invite and imagine God or Jesus himself saying, “You did the best you could in that situation!” In these difficult days, it is only tender forgiving hearts can help our world to move forward with more life, more peace, more joy. Blaming, punishing, retaliating only escalates violence, increasing death in the world.

So let’s fulfill our calling: to approach these days with tender hearts, forgiving others **and** ourselves over and over, which is the meaning of “7 times 70 times!”