

FORGIVENESS ISN'T ABOUT FORGIVENESS
FORGIVENESS IS ABOUT LOVE

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 13, 2026

There she goes, at it again! I can't believe he said that about me?! Will this ever end? I've forgiven them time, and time, again, and they keep doing the same old thing. I've been hurt too many times. I don't think I can forgive them anymore! I'm done!

And yet, we just heard Jesus responding to his disciple's question about how many times they should forgive someone, by saying; forgive, not seven times; but seventy-seven times! He was saying; don't stop forgiving; keep on doing it. But sometimes that seems absolutely impossible.

Yes, forgiveness is hard! Those wounds others have inflicted on us run deep. But there are also the wounds we have inflicted on others. Just like every one of you, I have known those wounds. I've had friends who hurt me, and I needed to forgive them. I've had supervisors in business and in the church manipulate me and twist things around against me, and I've needed to forgive them. Even many times in my forty-five years of marriage my wife Desiree has hurt me and angered me by the things she has said and the things she has done; and I have done the same to her. My children have hurt me. Church people have hurt me. My country has hurt me. So much hurt and pain and wounds. And as Christians we live under the impossible pressure spoken of in our scriptures to forgive others again and again, and again, and again.

Today's gospel is one of the hardest ones. On that day, the disciples came to Jesus asking him how many times they were required to forgive someone. They thought seven times was a big number. But in response Jesus said, not

seven times, but seventy–seven times; which can also be translated as seventy times seven; or 490 times. What Jesus is clearly saying here, is that we must forgive others, and to ask forgiveness of others, an infinite number of times.

To better explain what he meant to his shocked disciples, Jesus told them a story; a story about a servant who owed his master 10,000 talents. Now, in labor hours, that was equivalent to 60,000,000 workdays, or 3,650,000 years. Monetarily, at a pay rate of \$30 an hour, that would have been equivalent to \$1,440,000 times 10,000! An impossible debt that would never be paid, even in one hundred lifetimes. To extract some kind of payment from the servant, the master ordered him to be sold, along with his wife, children, and whatever he possessed, and repayment to be made. The servant fell on his face before his master, begging him to be patient with him until he could repay him. In deep profound compassion, the master forgave his servant his entire impossible debt.

But then another servant owed this servant 100 silver coins that would have been the equivalent of three months' wages. Monetarily, the equivalent of \$24,000. He grabbed that debtor servant by the throat and started to choke him, demanding that he repay him that very instant. The man immediately fell on his face begging the other servant to be patient with him until he could repay him. But he was harsh and unbending; unwilling to give him the time needed to repay, and instead threw him in prison until he could repay the debt.

Because of the first servant's lack of compassion and forgiveness to his fellow servant, his master threw him in prison to be tortured until his entire impossible debt was repaid. In this story we see Jesus setting before his

disciples, and you and me, an incredibly high standard of compassion and forgiveness of others.

How will we ever be able to meet this high standard? Well, my next eight words will get to the very heart of this whole forgiveness business. Here they are. FORGIVENESS IS NOT ABOUT FORGIVENESS. FORGIVENESS IS ABOUT LOVE. Let me say that one more time. FORGIVENESS IS NOT ABOUT FORGIVENESS. FORGIVENESS IS ABOUT LOVE. Forgiveness is not necessarily about focusing on “forgiving.” Forgiveness is about focusing on love.

The most important part of this passage I believe, is found at the very end of the very last verse. After Jesus talked about the master throwing his unforgiving servant into prison to be tortured, he ended with these words: “So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.” Forgiveness is not about having to go through the mechanics of forgiveness time after time after time of saying “I forgive you, I forgive you, I forgive you, I forgive you.” That’s not what this is about. It is about what Jesus said in the last three words in this passage: “from your heart.” Forgiveness is about the heart. Forgiveness is found in the heart.

There are many other places in our scriptures where we see this focus on love and the heart. In 1 Peter 1:22 the author wrote: “Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual affection, love one another deeply from the heart.” Other ancient manuscripts state it this way; “Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth through the Spirit.” Then we read in 1 John 4:20: “If anyone says ‘I love God’ and yet hates his fellow Christian, he is a liar, because the one who does not love his fellow Christian whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.” And then in Luke 6:27-28

Jesus said: “But I say to you who are listening: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.”

Now, added to the pressure we are under to forgive others, our scriptures put us under even more pressure to not only forgive, but to love, all people, even our enemies and those who hate us and curse us and mistreat us. We are told to forgive from our heart; to love one another deeply; to love our enemies, do good to those who hate us, bless those who curse us, and pray for those who mistreat us. And finally, these words: “The one who does not love his fellow Christian whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.” A seemingly impossible requirement to love and forgive. But love and forgiveness are intertwined. Here are those eight important words again: FORGIVENESS IS NOT ABOUT FORGIVENESS. FORGIVENESS IS ABOUT LOVE.

The more our love begins to look like God’s love, the less we will wound others through our words and actions, and the easier it will be to forgive others over and over again. So, how will we ever attain this level of love? How do we love all our fellow Christians; our enemies; those who hate us; who curse us; who mistreat us? To live in this kind of love is impossible for us, in and of ourselves; in our own natural human abilities. But it is absolutely possible, in and through, and of, God.

When Jesus calls us to forgive others “from our hearts,” the “heart,” refers to our total inner being. The heart acts as the central control center for all our thoughts, feelings, choices, and spiritual life. So, Jesus is calling us here to forgive from our thoughts, feelings, choices, and spiritual lives. First Peter earlier, said that we are to love one another deeply, from the heart; from all our thoughts, feelings, choices, and spiritual life. He speaks of our

obedience to the truth through the Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit of God that enables us to love all others in this seemingly impossible way.

So, how do we access this kind of God-love that comes through the Holy Spirit? We access it through obedience to God, and openness to God in our hearts; in our thoughts and feelings and choices and inner spiritual lives. We do this by recognizing when we are not living according to God's design for us; when maybe a scripture passage pricks our hearts; or when we read a book and the Holy Spirit reveals some area of darkness within us; or when we attend a study or listen to a talk and the Holy Spirit speaks to us about some change we need to make in our life; or in a time of silence the Holy Spirit brings to mind something we need to deal with.

We come to these realizations, and commit to change, and, in fact, do change, sometimes right away. But more often we change for a while, only to slip backwards again. And then we recommit to change and ask God's forgiveness and strength to change. And sometimes we have to recommit again and again and again and again; and ask God's forgiveness again and again and again and again. And here's the beautiful part in all of our stumbling around. God knows even more than we do every bit of our human weakness along with our desire to change, and sometimes our lack of desire to change, and God loves us completely and intimately and passionately and fully, in our failings, because God's only operating system is love.

As we encounter God's love, we will desire to be open in our hearts; in our thoughts and emotions and choices and spiritual lives to the inner whisperings of the Holy Spirit. We take steps to be more open; maybe by cutting down on our screen time, or our news time or other areas of our lives that might clog up our hearts, making it harder for us to hear from the

Spirit. And as we begin to be open to the inner whisperings of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, we will desire to be even more open to hear the Spirit's whispers and respond to those whisperings by changing various patterns and behaviors, which enables our hearts to be even more open.

As we continue to address this internal and external work, we become more faithful as disciples of Jesus. And as we do, and as we change, we become a more naturally loving individual, and then, eventually, an even more loving individual, and beyond that, an even MORE loving individual. And the more loving we become each step along the way, the less we will be bothered by the words and behaviors of others as we begin to feel more compassion and love towards them. And then instead of being bothered by the actions of others, we will find ourselves more aware of our own inappropriate words and behaviors, and begin to change them and to transform more and more into the likeness of Jesus.

Through this lifelong process, we will find ourselves able to love all others deeply; even those who were our former enemies. We will find ourselves more naturally and easily forgiving others. So yes, forgiveness is critical, but as I said; FORGIVENESS IS NOT ABOUT FORGIVENESS. FORGIVENESS IS ABOUT LOVE. Now, one final comment I need to make. Forgiveness and love for others does not mean that you will always remain in a relationship with those individuals. Because love for others must be preceded by a love for God and ourselves. And out of that love for God and ourselves, we in turn will love others. And in that love, we may sometimes have to break off some relationships that we find to be unhealthy for us and to our relationship with God.

Love one another deeply from the heart. Remember; FORGIVENESS IS NOT ABOUT FORGIVENESS. FORGIVENESS IS ABOUT LOVE.