

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits – who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s...The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Amen. [Psalm 103:2 – 5, 8]

On October 2, 2006 a man stormed into a one-room Amish schoolhouse in the community of Nickel Mines, a village in Lancaster County, PA., took hostages and shot eight girls (aged 6 – 13), killing five and then took his own life. In the week following this horrific event the people in this small community tore down the West Nickel Mines School, buried their children and attended the burial service of the killer, hugging his widow and offering condolences to his family. The emphasis on forgiveness and reconciliation in the Amish community's response was widely discussed in the media around the world. A year later a new one-room schoolhouse, the New Hope School, stood at a new location. Just a month prior to the one year anniversary members of the Amish community donated money to the killer's widow and her three small children. On the anniversary date school was closed and families gathered to pray.

As I read this week's texts it was these amazing acts of forgiveness that first came to my mind. While I couldn't remember the date or exact specifics, I remembered the event and the community's response. Like many around the world, the ability of this Amish community to forgive such a horrendous action has left a permanent impression on me.

With today's texts it would be hard to consider talking about anything other than forgiveness. Our lessons are stories of what forgiveness looks like: Joseph forgiving the awful wrongs that his brothers committed toward him; Paul's admonishment in his letters to the Romans for their judgmental behavior toward one another; and Jesus' response to Peter's question, how often should I forgive?' The parable of the Unforgiving Servant is only told in the gospel of Matthew, where it follows Peter's question. Luke chapter 17 does have Jesus saying to his disciples, "*If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, 'I repent,' you must forgive.*"

In Matthew Jesus's response to Peter is, "*Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.*" One of the devotions in Annie Herring's book, "*Glimpses - Seeing God in Everyday Life,*" is titled 'Forgive.' It begins with this text. Annie's interpretation of what Jesus is saying is that we have no right NOT to forgive seventy times seven, which I believe is just as easily stated, 'As many times as is needed.' Peter's

suggestion that he should forgive as many as seven times is an indication that he believes forgiveness can be counted and kept track of. Jesus follows his response with the unforgiving servant parable. Jesus often uses hyperbole in his parables and this is no exception. A servant owes the king 10,000 talents. One talent was about 6,000 denarii. Each denarius is worth one day's wages for a laborer. Doing the math this servant owes the king 60 million denarii – a huge sum that would be impossible for the servant to repay in a life time. In 2017 the U.S. median personal income was \$865/week or \$173/day so in our currency the servant would owe the king over \$10.3 billion dollars. Yet when the servant begs forgiveness, the king releases and forgives the man's debt. In contrast the second servant owes 100 denarii or in today's money \$17,300. Certainly still a lot of money but potentially a manageable debt to repay. Likewise the second servant begs forgiveness, but the first servant refuses and throws the man in prison until he can repay his debt. At this point the first servant is called back by the king, *'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 the king hands him over to be tortured. The final verse, *'So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart,'* sums it up, *'God's forgiveness is for all and all are to forgive.'*

Jesus uses the 'seventy times seven' as a means of telling us that we aren't to keep track of how many times we need to forgive or even pick and choose whom we will forgive. With a little multiplication or a calculator one can figure out that 'seventy times seven' is 490. Jesus' real point is that forgiveness is not something that can or should be calculated rather it is beyond one's ability to keep track of. Forgiveness is hard. It is only with God's intervention, compassion and mercy that forgiveness is facilitated and made possible, no matter how large or small the transgression.

It is important to remember that forgiveness doesn't mean excusing bad behavior. It doesn't mean that a person, for example, needs to stay in an abusive relationship and just keep forgiving over and over again. Forgiveness doesn't mean we are to ignore or excuse harmful behavior or inflicted pain, either emotional or physical. We need only go back to last week's gospel in which Jesus shared the process by which one is to address a situation in which another sins against you. The offense is not to be hidden away or glossed over, rather we are to address it with the offender and if that does not work, then take one or two others with you, as witnesses and speak to the offender. If that doesn't work then we are to bring it to the whole congregation. The reality is that in some situations it is necessary to seek intervention from counselors, lawyers and those who help to uphold the law in our communities.

One Biblical definition of forgiveness I found was that forgiveness refers to the state or act of pardon, remission of sin, or restoration of a friendly relationship. There are many examples in the Old Testament that clearly indicate forgiveness depends upon a person's atoning for sins committed. Leviticus Chapter 4 outlines the steps to be taken when the congregation of Israel breaks any of the Lord's commandments, thus incurring guilt. It involves sacrifice. Verse 20 says, "[The priest] *shall do with the bull just as is done with the bull of sin offering; he shall do the same with this. The priest shall make atonement for them, and they shall be forgiven.*" Atonement, the making of amends for a wrongdoing or an injury is a process of reconciliation.

Forgiveness isn't a light switch we can flip on. It isn't easy. Surely it wasn't easy for the people of Nickel Mines, PA to forgive the killer of their children, a man they knew as he was the milk truck driver making deliveries in their community. Forgiveness can and most often does occur only over a period of time and may need repetition – it can take perseverance. Annie Herring notes that '*countless times*' after forgiving another, negative feelings about the offense come back upon encountering that person again. Each time she takes it back to the Lord and is reminded that forgiveness isn't a feeling, but a choice we make. I suspect that every October 2nd, maybe even every single day, the people of Nickel Mines remember and seek God to continue to walk with them choosing forgiveness.

Surely Joseph whom we heard about in our Old Testament lesson kept returning to God as he sought to reconcile the awful things his brothers had done to him – their taunting as a child, selling him off to slave traders and then his subsequently ending up in prison. He had much to be bitter about toward his brothers. He has not forgotten all the pain his brothers inflicted upon him or the hardships he has suffered because of their actions. Yet in the midst of a huge famine, when his brothers show up at his door in Egypt where Joseph is now a man of means, prominence and power, rather than seek revenge he helps them. Rather than dwelling on the painful moments, Joseph chooses to remember his life within its whole context, to remember the good that God has brought out of the pain and hardship. He shares with his brothers that 'God intended it for good.' In today's lesson the brothers are begging for Joseph's forgiveness and Joseph chooses to offer reconciliation and forgiveness.

The harms we have experienced also unfortunately don't simply disappear when we forgive. One of the commentaries I read talks about the word 'remember' as actually meaning to put something back together again. That is what Joseph does – he remembers his life story differently. He puts it within the whole context of what God has

done with his life. He doesn't just remember what his brothers did to him but he also remembers what good God brought out of those painful moments in the past.

Martin Luther said we are both saint and sinner. We will continue to need to forgive others and to be forgiven, to seek God's mercy on us and his aid in granting mercy to others. Each one of us can think of times and actions in which we have been offended by another person. We also have times when we know we have hurt another by our words, actions and deeds – when we have sinned. But there is also the pain we inflict that isn't even known to us. I love the confession that includes the words, *'forgive us our sins, known and unknown,'* for I know in my heart there have been and will be again times that I have unintentionally hurt another. In today's world words are often flung out via emails, social media and other means without really thinking. At the time Peter asks, 'How many times should I forgive?' he has no idea of the hurt he will soon inflict as he denies Jesus three times and hides away while his Master is crucified.

Our weekly Confession and Forgiveness in worship, offers us a communal opportunity to place our sins before God and seek His forgiveness. It is a time for us to re-member the hurts in our life – to potentially put them back together within the context of the salvation and forgiveness offered to all people through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, even those who have hurt us. The psalmist tells us, *"Lord, you are full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love; you will not always accuse us, nor will you keep your anger forever."* Through the resurrection we have assurance of a God who is merciful offering forgiveness and grace; or as Assistant to the Bishop, Julie Grindle wrote in her Musings this week, *'this psalm shows the beautiful, complicated, grace-filled, abounding-in-love, never-give up relationship God has with us.'* May we too be compassionate and merciful to others, slow to anger and abounding in love for our friends and neighbors; for those who agree with us and those who think differently; for those come from different lands, those whose skin is a different color; those who speak a different language; for all people for we are all God's children. With God's help may we choose to forgive and to accept forgiveness offered.

Amen.