

There is Only 'Try'

Just when we think we have life figured out, just when we think we are nearing the horizon, Jesus pulls back the curtain to show us that we aren't even close to mastering the truth. He does this today just as he did with his disciples. Peter must have thought he was on to something. *"Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?"* Whether he was looking for the endpoint to forgiveness, a kind of bottom-line ethical standard, or whether he really thought his offer of seven times was truly generous, Jesus burst his religious bubble immediately. *"Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."* Seventy-seven times. Seventy-seven times. That's unrealistic and obscene! Does Jesus really expect us to forgive people seventy-seven times? Of course not. He expects us to forgive even more generously, even more graciously, even more frivolously than just seventy-seven times. He expects forgiveness to become as near to us as our breath, and, truth be told, if we ceased breathing after the seventy-seventh time, well, there wouldn't be much of us left anymore. That's what makes Jesus so dangerous if we truly give ourselves over to him. His ways are not our ways, and yet he expects his ways to *become* our ways.

In calling for forgiveness seventy-seven times over, he's not suggesting that the seventy-eighth time someone wrongs us, we can take vengeance into our own hands. He's painting a picture of a radical and non-sensical way of living in the world. Since the beginning, people have been taking vengeance into their own hands, achieving their desired end through violent means. Consider the story of Cain and Abel. After Cain's murder of Abel, the result of feeling slighted and rejected, the Lord commanded that anyone who harmed Cain would be avenged sevenfold. His descendant, Lamech, took that curse even further, and proclaimed that to anyone

who harmed him, vengeance would be wrought seventy-seven fold. See, the writer of the Gospel didn't just pull his numbers out of thin air. He's using an ancient story of violence and a curse to illustrate just how deep Jesus' reversal of that ingrained need for vengeance goes. Jesus' command to forgive seventy-seven times takes one of the most primal, vengeful stories in the Jewish tradition and subverts it...does something new, lays down a new law, a new way of being and relating to one another. I imagine Jesus, standing next to Peter, his eyes peering into the Great Mystery, his hands stretched as wide as he can reach them, a smile on his face as he says, *"Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."* Yes, his teaching is radical, and it's difficult. We are daily conditioned to be a people for whom forgiveness does not come easily. We expect, and hope, that what goes around comes around...that people get their due and get what's coming to them. But within the spiritual economy Jesus inaugurated with his life, death, and resurrection, vengeance has no place. Punishment does not belong to us, for we must first recognize that we ourselves are broken...that we have wronged people...that we have at times been cruel, hurtful, manipulative...that we behave in ways that do not build up those around us. Yet even at our most depraved, even at our most hurtful, even at our most sinful moments, the love of God was still given to us, seen in the loving and forgiving face of Jesus Christ. We have been redeemed by the superabundant, frivolous love of God, and that comes with a cost. The cost, the sacrifice, of our need to take vengeance, or hold grudges, or withhold forgiveness to those who wrong us.

Living this way, however, is to be a perpetual work in progress, since we will undoubtedly be hurt time and again by people we love, and unfortunately, we too will continue to hurt those we love because we aren't perfect, and life is endlessly complex. I'm still working on this. I find that forgiveness comes easy, but it's almost impossible for me to not let a hurt

from the past cloud my own judgment. So then, I must face this question: is it really forgiveness when I cling to my right to be hurt and bring that up to others when convenient? Perhaps it's an imperfect forgiveness, but nevertheless, I'm a work in progress, as are you. But being a work in progress isn't so bad, because it means we are listening. Listening to Spirit. Listening to what comes through the Gospel. Listening to the needs and voices of others whose forgiveness towards us proves that the impossible is indeed possible.

And in a world that can't ever imagine the impossible becoming real, forgiveness and reconciliation become the medicine the world needs. It's the corrective to these horrible cycles of violence and abuse we bear witness to every day. It's the cure for the disease of inhumanity. It's the only way to move through a world on the brink, pulling it back from the edge of self-destruction.

Let's be honest, though. Forgiveness hurts. It hurts sometimes to set our pain aside, not ignoring it, but no longer allowing it to have control over who we are and how we will move through the world. Forgiveness shows the world that people don't have to be defined by their worst days, and that includes us. Don't you want to live in a world in which people aren't judged by their worst moments, or mistakes? Do you want people to judge you for the worst things you've ever done? I, for one, want to live in a world captured by the spirit of forgiveness. I want my son to grow up in a world that sees people at their best, not their worst. I want my son to grow up in a world saturated by the redemptive love of God, in an age of reconciliation inaugurated by the Prince of Peace, not an age held captive to the spirit of vengeance, a spirit which only ever brings mutually-assured destruction!

Thank God we haven't been left alone, lost among the chaos of our own decisions. Jesus is the one who reorients us when we wander, who guides us when we feel lost, who saves us

time and time again when we fall into sinfulness. Jesus is the one to whom we look when we are unsure how to live in the world. Jesus is the one against whom we should measure every decision of our lives. As St. Paul spoke so long ago, and as we heard this morning, “*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.*” As Christians, we live lives perpetually in response to the grace, love, mercy, and forgiveness of God in Christ. For those of us who have been washed in the waters of baptism, there is no going backward to a life lived before Jesus Christ. And there is no moving forward without him. So, rather than struggling against the kind of life he desires for us, just surrender to it. Let’s recommit ourselves to his way of life as many times as we need to, as daunting and difficult as it may seem. Let’s peer into the Great Mystery along with him, and be overcome with gratitude for the salvation we have so graciously been given. And then, let’s go out into the world and be frivolous with grace and forgiveness as well. Because, after all, only beauty and love will save the world.