

A Homily by the Rev. Dr. Renée Tembeckjian
Trinity Episcopal Church
13 September 2026
Genesis 50:15-21; Psalm 103:8-13; Romans 14:7-9; Matthew 18:21-35

“Debt Free”

*Everyone says that forgiveness is a lovely idea...
that is, until there is actually something to forgive.*

It was author/theologian C.S. Lewis who made this observation about human nature. Forgiveness is a complicated nuanced, and sometimes polarizing subject., which we as Christians encounter frequently, each time we pray those familiar and beloved words:

*Forgive us our trespasses
as we forgive those who trespass against us.*

In today’s Gospel, it is Peter who raises the subject. He doesn’t question whether or not he *should* forgive, but asks Jesus how many *times*?

*Lord, if someone sins against me, how often should I forgive?
As many as seven times?*

Perhaps hoping Jesus will compliment his largesse, Peter may have been surprised by the answer he receives:

Not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

Jesus is not being literal here, but uses a magnitude of arithmetic to reframe the subject of forgiveness altogether and turns to a parable as a means of teaching. He describes a servant who owes ten thousand talents to the king. Again, he uses a large number, this time to illustrate what it means to be impossibly indebted to another.

The king is not inclined to forgive, but in being moved by the plea of his servant, he erases the debt and frees him. There would be lesson enough in that, but the parable takes a turn when that same servant will not likewise forgive someone indebted to *him*. Instead of grace, he renders punishment. And for that, he finds himself summoned back before his king, where he pays a horrible price for violating the principle which came to be called the Golden Rule.

We are prone to violating it as well. Like the servant, we tend to do unto others not as we *would* have them do unto us, but as they *have* done unto us. We are inclined not so much to set an example as to keep score

Granted, the call to forgive is not easy and may be sorely tested, especially when we or someone we love has suffered a wrong, experienced injury, or worse. We may refuse to erase the debt, whatever it is, to nurse our anger or hold a grudge. We might even dream of revenge.

But this response, however understandable, exacts a steep price from the human soul.

Perhaps that explains the dreadful, grim warning from Jesus in this passage – that a rigid refusal to forgive, especially as we are forgiven, is akin to suffering and torture.

This wisdom was echoed centuries later by Nelson Mandela:

*To cherish resentment or thoughts of retaliation or punishment,
is like drinking poison in the hope that someone else will get sick.*

It is a message echoed centuries *earlier* in the wisdom of Confucius:

*When you embark on a journey of revenge,
you had better dig two graves.*

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To *offer* forgiveness does not mean to forget or condone the wrong. It does not ignore the reality of consequences, excuse criminality, or replace a call for justice. It does not simplify or cheapen the complicated challenge of reconciliation. To *seek* forgiveness is not a passive or superficial process of erasure. It requires the courage for honest conversation, to recognize and acknowledge our own part in the dishonesty or injury.

Perhaps most significantly, forgiveness requires a spirit of contrition, a desire to repent. When discussing this, folks are often quick to cite parable of the Prodigal Son, but often forget that the son initiated that reconciliation only after he himself tasted the bitter pill of his own choice to leave the family in the first place. And when he does return, he does so humbly, repentant, and expecting no special treatment. As for the father's part, in fully welcoming back his son, he makes a choice as well – to reject the myth that holding onto anger or insisting on payback can possibly bring any measure of peace.

*Forgiveness is a refusal to pay the perpetrator back in his own coin
only to find, ironically and perhaps bitterly,
that we are the ones rendered poorer by it (Desmond Tutu).*

In this, we remember the choice of a wholly innocent Jesus, who, even when mercilessly ridiculed and tortured by the power brokers of hate, refuses to pay them back in *their* own coin. He will not ingest the poison hate or incite his followers to revenge.

Instead, he prays for the soldiers who arrest him, for the priests who mock him, for the state that fears him. He reassures the criminals who taunt him, absolves the crowds that condemn him, and he embraces the friends who deny him.

In praying for all of *these*, Jesus prays for all of *us*, too often like the servant in the parable, not always quick or willing to forgive, even as we are impossibly indebted to a God of boundless mercy. And his prayer, among the very last words of his human life, not only challenges the human spirit, but echoes across the arc of all human history:

Father, forgive them...

Amen.