

Matthew 18:21

Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but I tell you, seventy-seven times."

A multitude of questions are haunting us these days;

- When will there be a vaccine for Covid-19, will it be safe, when it does happen how will we ensure that people have equal access?
- Will the current social unrest; protests, podcasts and activism finally finish the job that the civil war and the civil rights movements did not?
- What is going to happen on the days, weeks of even months after the election? What will happen if the party currently in power stays in power? What will happen if they don't?
- How will we live with the results of the election if it doesn't go our way?

It is a brief but challenging exchange between Peter and Jesus in Gospel of Mathew, the question centers on forgiveness, how, when and how many times are we expected to forgive?

Peter comes to Jesus seeking to understand where to set the bar on forgiveness. "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?"

Once or twice is understandable, but Peter thinking will outdo them all suggests that he is willing to go the distance and forgive seven times?

To that Jesus suggests seventy-seven times.

"I always pray for the people who have hurt or harmed me, and just when I think I've forgiven them, I forgive them again, because otherwise that energy will rear its head... Otherwise, I'm holding onto that shadow of anger; and the inability to forgive, they say, is a poison you take hoping someone else will die." Seane Corn (yoga guru and social activist)

Have you ever prayed for someone who has wronged you- I'll bet you have. Did you prayed for them twice? How about seven times, how about seventy-seven times?

I can imagine a scenario in which someone in a church, not our church of course, but a church- wrongs another member of the flock. One person has to find the courage to ask for forgiveness, the other find the courage to grant it. Which do you think is the harder thing to do?

The thing I know about forgiveness is that not all forgiveness is created equal. Sometimes there are strings attached like: I'll forgive you if you promise never to do that again. Or I'll forgive you, but I am keeping track of how many times you've screwed up.

You'll notice Jesus doesn't offer any caveats to forgiveness.

Jesus forgiveness runs clean, total forgiveness, not once, not seven, but seventy-seven times.

Now the thing to remember here is that Jesus is telling us less about ourselves than about God, right? How many times do the people of the good book get it wrong and how many times does their Creator forgive them, at least seventy-seven times.

Jesus doesn't expect Peter to be God, but in the ways he can, to be like God. To strive toward that seemingly impossible task to love one another enough to forgive them when they have broken our heart, because that is the way God loves. God loves as if forgiveness is a deep well that will never run dry and we are called to do likewise.

Now understand that Jesus forgiveness does not assume that the wronged party does not deserve to be confronted for their wrong doing. That doesn't reflect the Gospel- the Gospel according to Jesus is highly confrontational. There are even instructions on how to go about it, start one on one, if that doesn't work try brining in a trusted elder, if that still doesn't work take it to the beloved community. Forgiveness without addressing the wrongdoing truthfully will not lead to reconciliation and healing.

Let's circle back to the questions with which we began-

How will we forgive Covid? We can't confront a virus, but we can confront the people who were in charge of withholding information about the virus. We will confront the people who made the decisions about where and how to make testing available- those who were complicit in withholding treatment from poor people and communities of color.

Oh, there must be a mighty reconning for all of that wrongdoing- and then, we must work to forgive them and move on.

And what of the question of racial injustice in this nation, how will we find a way to forgive those who have willingly and knowingly stood in the role of oppressor. Three words; remembrance, repentance and reparation.

When those three efforts have been painstakingly made, when black and brown, and indigenous needs are seen as Holy needs then and only then will we begin a path toward forgiveness.

Will we ever be able to forgive those we feel have wronged our nation, wronged our planet, how on earth will we ever find a way to move forward together?

That question depends entirely on what we understand as the core of our faith. Jesus said, Love your neighbor as yourself.

Therefore, how we behave post-election must be consistent with our witness to that central tenant. We will have to ask ourselves every day if our actions and our thoughts are in keeping with the values we hold dear- and if they are not, then we will work to bring them back into line.

We must ask ourselves each day if there is more that needs to be done for “the least of these,” the peoples on the margins, the people hit hardest by the wrongdoing of the last four years, of the last six months. Every action, every deed must necessarily be on behalf of and with those who are suffering.

Then and only then will we be able to forgive because I’ll tell you faithful brothers and sister’s forgiveness is not a problem for people whose spiritual houses are in order.

Gospel faith is a discipline, it is not there to make us feel all warm and fuzzy it is there to kick our butts into gear. The church is not a bunker from the outside world the church is a training ground for action and mission.

So, strap up friends because the road ahead is steep and the only way to the promise land is through some rough terrain. It is the path we know as followers of Jesus we must take, it is the path with the trailhead that reads “seventy seven”. Amen