

Our gospel today contains some of Jesus' best-known words about forgiveness. Like last week's gospel these interactions between Jesus and his disciples communicate pretty clearly that forgiveness is meant to be one of a fundamental part of our life together as Christian community. I want to share with you three short stories that may seem to have nothing to do with one another, any perhaps even less to do with the idea of forgiveness. But bear with me.

First story. Of the many and varied things in her life that showcased her gifts and talents along with her creativity and experience, by her own admission cooking was not one of them. In her later years, one of mom's tag lines when serving a meal was "do you like this? I bought it myself!" Now, to be fair, mom could and did cook. Good, tasty food. She had certain dishes in her everyday rotation and a few in her special occasion repertoire that she had truly perfected. But she never really liked cooking, never felt particularly confident in it, and self-admittedly lacked much in the way of creativity, let alone risk-taking. Once, when she was working through a recipe with one of my dad's interns, who before entering seminary had trained as a chef, he put his finger on her particular style of cooking. "Lynn, you cook like a scientist," he said. And it was true. Right down to looking for the meniscus when measuring a half-cup of milk. Exact replication was the key for her—which explains her rather small range of special dishes. But Steve's words didn't hurt, they helped her identify what she was good at, how she was wired, and, later on, to let go graciously and almost entirely of a task she truly didn't like.

Second story. One of my dad's most quoted comic strips from the Sunday paper over his 50+ years as a pastor has been from Dennis the Menace, which he felt captured the essence of what we're talking about when we talk about grace. In this particular strip, Dennis and his friend Joey go over to see Dennis' next door neighbor Mrs. Wilson, who just happens to have recently finished baking a batch of chocolate chip cookies. Mrs. Wilson puts a pile of these fresh, hot cookies on a plate and sets them down in front of Dennis and Joey with a big smile on her face. As they eat the cookies, Joey says to Dennis, "I just don't understand what we did to deserve chocolate chip cookies every time we come over here." To which Dennis replies, "how many times I have to explain this to you, Joey? Mrs. Wilson doesn't give us cookies because **we're** good, she gives us cookies because **she's** good!

Third story. I can practically pinpoint the moment when our two sons Simon and Elijah understood for the first time the intersection between overwhelming abundance and unlimited freedom. It was the summer of 2006, and we were at

Carthage College for the ELCA's Summer Missionary conference. During the day, they were involved in a wonderful children's program, run by über-cool young adults who led them in games and songs, field trips and service projects. It was at meal times, once they had checked in with us, that they came to know this abundance and freedom. They had never seen a cafeteria like the one at Carthage before. Every night they had choices—grilled cheese, pasta, pizza, meat and potatoes, Asian food, salad bar. They could serve themselves whatever soda they wanted. There was soft serve ice cream and toppings twice a day! Abundance and freedom. Sure, we had to reign them in a bit, insist on some vegetables and milk, for example. But within the confines of the Carthage cafeteria, more than a dozen times in a week, they experienced abundance and freedom.

Back to the gospel. Peter asks Jesus: how many times must I forgive somebody who has sinned against me? What if that somebody was a fellow member of the church? How many times, Jesus? How about seven? Would seven be good? I honestly think Peter thought he was being generous, merciful even. Think about it: to forgive the same person seven times for seven different occasions where they've sinned against you might already seem excessive, right? That's more than twice the criteria set by our famous "three strikes and you're out" judicial standards. Peter truly believes he's going above and beyond: "I'm willing to forgive someone seven times, Jesus. That's more than enough, right?"

But of course, it is not. Seven times? Jesus says, try seventy-seven times or seven hundred and seven times, or seventy times seven times—depending on which translation you read. And actually, the particular translation doesn't really matter here, since Jesus is insisting that it is not the number that matters at all. When Peter shares that what he thinks is generous, merciful, even extravagant, Jesus says think again. Seven times is not enough. Not nearly enough. Jesus' response is a way of having Peter and the disciples think of the biggest number they can imagine, then keep going: add one more, multiply it by seven, add a zero or two, and even so you won't approach the number of times we are called to forgive.

Because, the focus ought to be on the forgiving itself, not on the number of times. As Pastor John reminded us last week, followers of Jesus don't count up points. Not in trying to add up how important we are—or tally who is the greatest, the most Godly, the most important among us. Not in deciding whose sin is the worse than whose, as if such a thing could be calculated and quantified. Not in determining whose good works have gotten them the closest to the heavenly sought-after prize, since, as we will sing again today, we know that we are saved by grace alone and not because we deserve it. Once again in this week's gospel story, as in last week's, Jesus is telling us to get rid of this

notion of keeping points. He tells us that rather than counting the times we forgive, we should keep forgiving well beyond the highest number we can count. He encourages us even to lose track of how many times we've forgiven, and instead to first of all remember that we've BEEN forgiven, and then bask in the joy of relationships restored because of forgiveness.

Now we need to be careful that we don't misuse or abuse this understanding. We need to be careful that our call to forgive one another without counting up the times we do so doesn't suggest to someone—particularly those in abusive relationships or living under oppressive systems—to ignore their suffering and forget about their pain. In those cases—and others, too, I would imagine—it's important to remember that as important as it is, forgiveness doesn't replace justice being carried out. Sometimes, as in the case of the family members who publicly forgave Dylann Roof for killing their loved ones at Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston, South Carolina, forgiveness accompanies a process of trial and judgment. Sometimes, as in the case of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, individual and corporate acts of repentance and forgiveness are the very thing that allows a group of people to move forward—to move beyond their scarred and sinful past. As simple as it sounds, forgiving someone seven times, seventy-seven times, or seventy times seven times is actually hard work, work that doesn't always come naturally, work that doesn't always follow the same shape or form.

So this is where my three stories come in. See, my mother used to approach recipes like scientific experiments, wanting exact measures, predictable and replicable results each time. Though she later developed the self-awareness to know that this was not one of her many gifts, and to realize that the act of cooking was much more an art than a science, it was not without a struggle and lots of trail and error.

Maybe forgiveness is like that, too. More an art than a science. More a reflex, a way of life than a set of how-to steps to follow. We can't enter into forgiveness with the mindset of it being finite, measurable, or limited to a certain number of times. The act of forgiveness is itself already a limitless, measureless act. As people of the cross, people who follow Jesus, forgiveness is never *not* present in our lives or our relationships. Forgiveness is woven into who we are as Christ's people. It's a constant. It's ongoing. It's not optional, not a choice.¹

Nor is it something we do because we're so good. Like Dennis and Joey, we need to see that it's God's goodness that makes forgiveness possible. Not only that, as David Lose points out Luther's great insight 500 years ago was the

¹Based on Karoline Lewis, "Forgiveness 101," www.workingpreacher.org, accessed 9/14/2017.

realization that righteousness was not God's *expectation of us* but God's *gift to us*. 500 years later, we would do well to realize, too, that some of God's favorite things to do are to forgive those who seem unforgivable, love those who feel unlovable, and make right those things that seem so persistently in the wrong.²

And in that abundance of mercy, that abundance of forgiveness, there is a freedom. A freedom to love and forgive and care for those around us. Like elementary kids let loose in a college cafeteria for the first time, we experience the abundance and freedom that comes to us in God's forgiveness and mercy, and we can't help but want to offer that forgiveness to others as well.

A young poet and educator named Joe Davis was with us on our staff retreat a couple of weeks ago, and in one of our sessions he said something that has stuck with me—so much so that I hear in my head and even repeat to myself both silently and aloud during times of prayer and meditation. Let his words be our last word today as we consider that our call to forgive flows from God's radical and limitless forgiveness offered first to us.

He said, "There is absolutely nothing that God can't forgive, no matter what it is, no matter when it was. Because there is no Grace Period. There's only Grace. Period."

Thanks be to God. Amen.

² David Lose, "Forgiveness," www.inthetime.org, accessed 9/16/2017.