

Monday, June 29, 2020

## **Seventy-seven times**

**- Pastor Hank French**

*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 (Matthew 18:21-22).*

This is an interesting text on many levels. First, it is good to remember that the Gospel of Matthew was written towards the end of the first century, somewhere around the year 90, some 60 years after Jesus' death. It was written for a Christian community whose members were largely Jews who had come to believe that Jesus was the long-promised Messiah and had embraced this relatively new Christian faith.

The Gospel of Matthew was written to instruct these new Jewish believers both in the teachings of Jesus and in the implications of Jesus' teachings for their lives as people who have chosen to follow Jesus. All of the Gospels agree that Christian faith is not just a way of belief, rather it is a way of life grounded in what we believe about Jesus.

In this text, the teaching of Jesus on the importance of forgiveness within the community of faith is the central focus. Families, friendships, collegial relationships and communities of faith can be terribly weakened, if not destroyed, when people cannot or will not forgive real—or imagined—offenses.

Many of the things that make us angry or hurt are not worth staying angry or hurt over and forgiveness is the way back into relationship with the other. There are, however, other offenses that are far more serious, and in such cases, forgiving someone does not mean that you are condoning unethical, immoral, abusive or criminal behavior, and it does not mean that continuing or reentering a relationship with the offender would be called for. What forgiveness does mean in such situations is that the one who forgives becomes free of the soul deadening effects of bitterness, anger, and the desire for revenge.

Remember, the Gospel of Matthew was written to instruct Jews new to the Christian faith about the teachings of Jesus with the expectation that they will follow those teachings. On hearing this teaching on forgiveness, they would no doubt know the source of Jesus teaching: "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD" (Leviticus 19:18). Forgiveness is a way to love our neighbor and to love ourselves.

When Peter asked Jesus if he had to forgive up to seven times, it meant that he was not willing to really forgive; he was simply biding his time until he no longer had to forgive. Jesus' response that he should forgive not seven times but seventy-seven times means that one should never stop forgiving. Why? Because forgiveness heals relationships that can and should be healed—and relationships matter. When a relationship can't and shouldn't be restored, forgiveness frees the one who forgives from the soul corroding effects of bitterness, anger, and the desire for revenge—and that freedom matters.

Prayer: Holy and forgiving God, I ask you to continue forgiving us as we continue forgiving others.  
Amen.