

*Communion: a for-giving ritual*  
*Matthew 18:21–35; Genesis 50:15–21; Matthew 26:26-28*

Peter asked Jesus, “If my brother or sister sins against me, how often shall I forgive?” It occurs to me that if any of us were asking the question of Jesus today, we might ask, “If my brother or sister sins against me, *shall* I forgive them?”

Either question, I imagine Jesus’ answer is the same. “Of course you forgive, and not only seven times, but 77 times!” And follow with a parable that lets me see how much I want to be forgiven...and how quickly and easily I forget and turn around, unwilling and slow to forgive.

Of course, you might be saying (it’s what I’m saying inside my head!), “Forgiveness is complicated.” But I wonder if I wouldn’t have a hard time convincing Jesus of that. He seems to think that forgiveness is pretty straightforward.

So let’s dig around this part of Matthew’s Gospel. What’s the story of God’s people that Matthew’s retelling and reimagining? What’s the Good News?

At first glance, Peter asking whether he should forgive seven times seems a bit random. Until we remember that in the sacrificial system (which Peter was steeped in), seven is a significant repetition. For the sin offering, the priest dips his finger in the blood of the animal that is being offered and sprinkles the “blood seven times before the LORD in front of the curtain of the sanctuary.” This is how the priest makes atonement for the sin, and how the sin is forgiven (Lev 4). And when persons are unclean, from disease or bleeding or whatever, they’re confined...excluded...for seven days.

And when Jacob comes to Esau, hoping for reconciliation for his sin against Esau, Jacob bowed “himself to the ground seven times (Gen 33.3).”

The number seven represents “order and perfection.”<sup>i</sup> The seven days of creation begin that *perfection and order*. In the Book of Leviticus especially we see the #7 being used to establish this same *order and perfection* in the community. It’s used to build the structures and to place boundaries around the community. The #7 is also used for time, for marking holy days, and Jubilee.

So Peter is right to assume that seven is the number of times to forgive. His expectation reflects the rituals of the community that have formed him.

But Jesus, being Jesus!, is of course seeing and imagining the Kingdom of God differently. “No,” he answers, “not 7 times!” Once again we’re reminded that the Kingdom of God looks very different than kingdoms built on the blood of sacrificial offerings, than kingdoms founded on the blood of victims. “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.”<sup>ii</sup> And we begin to glimpse the abundance and extravagance of forgiveness in the Kingdom of God.

The God that Jesus is revealing does not require blood to be sprinkled to atone for sin. Not only does the God of Jesus not require sacrifices for the forgiveness of sins, the Living God doesn’t want anything to do with the sacrificial system. Jesus knew and understood this. And of course it’s the thing that kept getting him into trouble. The descendants of Jacob thought God wanted and needed sacrifices. They thought it was God who had established the boundaries of clean and unclean, the laws of atonement and redemption, and the repetition of 7. The law demanded sacrifices be offered; it required separation and exclusion.

The law left victims in its wake.

And Jesus saw those victims. He saw the bodies of those who were broken and diseased and excluded. And he responded, “Son, be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven you (Mat 9.2).” In offering forgiveness to the paralytic, Jesus completely bypasses the Temple and its

sacrificial system. By extending forgiveness without offering a sacrifice, Jesus *carelessly* disregarded the law, choosing instead to *care* for the hurting human beings who had come to him. And when the system objected, saying that he had no right or authority to forgive sins, he answered, “Which is easier to say? Your sins are forgiven you, or, rise up and walk?” In the Kingdom of God, there is no counting! The Kingdom of God generously and extravagantly offers liberation and release, forgiveness and mercy, healing and grace.

To help Peter understand...to help us understand the generosity and the for-giving of God’s Kingdom ... Jesus tells a parable about the stinginess of human forgiving. I am much more like the person in this parable than I want to admit. With my words and attitudes of judgment and condemnation, forgetting that I have been forgiven much, I readily throttle white supremacists, and predators, misogynists, politicians.... Not because they’ve sinned against me, but because they are sinning against others. So to satisfy my desire for justice, I want vengeance. I do.

In my defense, in our defense, *it is good* that we see victims. Following Jesus, our eyes have been opened to see those on the margins, to see the bodies suffering under the weight of systemic racism, those incarcerated by a system that seeks to punish rather than reconcile and restore, and the bodies carrying the pain and shame of violation. It is right that we see victims; we *must* see victims. It is right that we demand justice. It is right that we name and call out perpetrators of any kind of violence.

What seems complicated about forgiveness is forgiving perpetrators. Or, maybe it isn’t complicated; maybe I just don’t know how to do forgive such sinners. That size of a debt. Or, I just don’t want to forgive such sinners. I don’t think they deserve it. I want someone to seize them by the neck, demand justice, and throw them into prison.

It is here that Jesus simply leaves me shaking my head, confounded.

Jesus is relentless in his pursuit of liberation and justice for victims and those excluded and marginalized, for the sick and the weak, the dispossessed and the immigrant. And even as he pursues liberation and justice for victims, he is opening up spaces of forgiveness to those who sin against him. He's equally relentless in his expectation that forgiveness is a gift, that it's generously and extravagantly shared. Perhaps even wasted. He insists that forgiveness can't be earned.

In the sacrificial system, forgiveness is transactional. Payment for sins is expected. The writer of Hebrews says, in 9.22, "Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins." But the economy of the Kingdom of God is not transactional. In the Kingdom of God, God has *already given* mercy. Mercy and grace and love are *for-given*. For-giving in God's Kingdom is for victims *and* oppressors; for those who have been violated *and* those who perpetrate violence; for those who suffer *and* for those who cause suffering.

This for-giving is scandalous. And suddenly communion becomes equally scandalous. When all around them sacrifices were being made, sacrifices that maintained the *order and perfection* of the community, Jesus refused to participate. Jesus rejected the ritual of shedding blood, and instead offered a ritual of for-giving. Instead of offering flesh and blood, he offered bread and wine. Instead of offering a victim's body, he offered his own. Where there was no blood being sprinkled, Jesus offered a cup saying, "Drink from it, all of you; for this...this fruit of the vine...is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

In offering the cup to his disciples, even to those who would sin against him, he was for-giving. Not seven times but 77 times!

We have already been given mercy...and love and grace and liberation and healing. We have been for-given with a generosity that's hard to realize and appreciate. And Jesus so precisely names how easily we forget that we are children of a merciful and gracious and forgiving God.

Joseph's words from Genesis offer much wisdom, and a way forward. A straightforward approach to forgiving. Speaking to the brothers who tried to kill him, Joseph says, "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as God is doing today."

Joseph understood that the Living God was not a transactional God. The economy of the Kindom of God is already and always giving...for-giving. In the Kindom of God, the Spirit of God is already and always at work, blowing and breathing, opening spaces and hearts and minds and bodies for justice and reconciliation.<sup>iii</sup>

The failure of the servant whose debt was forgiven wasn't that he identified a debt owed to him. His failure was, my failure is, when I demand vengeance. Vengeance is God's. And from Joseph to Jesus, we see the aliveness and creativity of the Spirit, breathing life where we see only the death of human failure; breathing justice and reconciliation where we only see human condemnation and vengeance.

So while we are protesting...as we must...as we are naming injustice...as we must...we do so in a posture of forgiveness, forgiving 77x. In places of oppression and injustice, instead of condemnation and vengeance, with the Holy Spirit we are conduits for justice. Where there is hate, we bring our bodies, people of faith, trusting that God's love and forgiving will be realized.

So that we can be forgiving people, we need the ritual of Communion. At Jesus' Table we are being formed by the economy of God's Kindom. At the Lord's Table we are made

ready to be conduits with the Spirit of God. At the Table of the Living Christ, we are being transformed from our slow and stingy ways into generous, forgiving people; into extravagant, already giving people.

It is Good News that we have been forgiven! And it is hard news to forgive 77x. May we live each day...moment by moment...remembering that we live in God's economy...where Love and Forgiving and Mercy and Grace are gift, generously, gratuitously, already given!

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<sup>i</sup> Everett Fox in *The Five Books of Moses*

<sup>ii</sup> Jesus and Matthew are also recalling Lamech's vengeance in Genesis 4.23-26, "If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold."

<sup>iii</sup> "The Holy Spirit is eager to open up spaces for justice." Nancy Bedford at Believer's Church Conference quoted in a conversation with Rachel Siemans.