

## “As Many As Seven Times?”

Matthew 18:21-35

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I have to love Peter. Though he is known as **Saint** Peter and as the **Rock**, he is also very human. I can relate to him. Evidently, in his church, there was a member who was rubbing him the wrong way, getting under his skin, annoying him to no end. He knows he needs to forgive this person. He wants to be generous, extraordinarily generous, but he feels there is a limit as to how many times he can forgive this person. He approaches Jesus with what he is sure is a generous offer, ‘as many as seven times?’ We picture Peter feeling pretty self-righteous about his willingness to forgive THAT many times. Seven times!

Jesus blows the wind out of his sails when he replies, “Not seven, but seventy times seven times! If my Math is right, that’s 490 times! What Jesus is really doing here is seizing a teachable moment. What matters most to Jesus is reconciliation. When reconciliation is the goal, there is no limit on the number of times one forgives.

In our United Church of Christ Statement of Faith, we declare:  
**In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, God has come to us,  
reconciling the whole Creation to its Creator.**

This is one of our core beliefs. Christ came into the world to do the work of reconciling the brokenness, reconciling the separations, reconciling whatever prevents a neighbor from loving a neighbor. So, when Peter asked Jesus this very understandable question, it gave Jesus an opportunity to teach a profound lesson.

Forgiveness is a wonderful gift, but reconciliation is what God hopes for. If reconciliation requires 490 expressions of forgiveness, then let it be so!

In baseball, it's three strikes and you're out. In football, it's four downs and you surrender the ball to the other team. In tennis, it's two faults on your serve and you've lost the point! In the Christian community, the goal is not to keep score for the sake of excluding some one; the goal is to keep on loving until a true reconciliation is accomplished. This is hard work. This is harder than building a house with Habitat; harder than feeding homeless people at a shelter. Yet, this is the work God places in our hands. God has no other hands but ours. So the work of being a reconciling force in the world falls to us. Do I have to forgive that miserable creature as many as seven times? No, not seven, but seventy times seven times.

In the modern era, the boldest incarnations of reconciliation have come out of Africa. Bishop Desmond Tutu and many others in South Africa invited oppressors and oppressed to come together, to share their stories and their confessions, their forgiveness and their grace. Miraculous things happened at that table of reconciliation. A similar effort was made in Rwanda following the genocide in that country. I raise up those two examples because the world could not have imagined anything like reconciliation happening in those places of racial and tribal divide. God's work is not easy. But it is divine. As many as seven times? No, as many as seventy times seven times!

I can imagine Lucy, in the Peanuts comic strip, taking full advantage of this Biblical teaching, using it to get the upper hand. She's been heckling and bullying Charlie Brown, saying to herself in her infamous, self-righteous tone, 'according to my church school teacher, I've beat up on Charlie Brown only 470 times. So, I've got 20 more to go! Lucy, of course, misses the point!

It's not about how many times I can get away with wounding my neighbor, expecting to be forgiven; it's about how long it will take to love my neighbor into a peaceful reconciliation.

This was a controversial teaching when Jesus first uttered it. It remains a controversial teaching. We struggle with this notion of forgiving one who has wronged us. I do. I imagine you do, too. The thought of forgiving as many as seven times rubs us the wrong way. And the thought of 490 times is ridiculous. Yet, Jesus calls us to walk the higher ground, to imagine a reconciliation.

Forgive me if I have told this story before. It seems to fit here. My father left my mother to marry a woman in a neighboring town. Having raised six children with my mother, he and his second wife raised three more children. When that marriage ended, he married a third time and raised another two children with wife number three. For many years, the eleven children played a kind of a game of avoidance. We were aware of each other, but there were jealousies and envies and suspicions and resentments. Things had been said that shouldn't have been said. Forgiveness was needed, but it wasn't happening. Then, one day in March 1994, I got the call from the hospital in Springfield, Massachusetts that my dad had a brain tumor and was about to have surgery. He might not make it through the operation.

I dropped whatever it was I was doing here and headed north on Interstate 91. I remember getting off at the wrong exit, realized I was lost, and saw a homeless man pushing a grocery cart with his worldly possessions. I stopped to ask him for directions to Bay State Hospital. There must have been a look of terror in my eyes, because that homeless man pushed his cart into the weeds and jumped into the passenger seat of my old Chevy truck and guided me to the hospital.

I walked into the surgical family waiting area, and there, ahead of me, were the other ten children. They were all there: Bob, Deb, Bill, Tom, David, Jack, Brenda, Robyn, Shawn, and Megan. Instantly, we were all talking, hugging, crying, loving. It was as if all of the baggage from the past had melted away. None of it mattered anymore. My Uncle Perry was there, too. He spoke up saying, “Dickie, don’t you think we should be praying for a miracle?” I looked around the room at all the faces, at all the lives, at all the heartache; everyone sharing the same last name, and I said to my uncle, “Look around. I think the miracle is right here in this room.” And it was a miracle. There was a reconciliation of the kind Jesus had in mind when he said to Peter, ‘not seven times, but seventy times seven times.’

Since that day, I have done Christmas shopping in Brenda’s boutique. I conducted Robyn’s wedding. I play tennis with Shawn. And I go see Megan when she is on stage.

Jesus let Peter know that forgiveness is a true grace and that reconciliation is an amazing grace! Whenever we see the signs of reconciliation, that is when we know we are living in the greatest of hope. Amen.