



56A PENTECOST 15A BIBLE STUDY

Grace, Forgiveness and Love

Abstract

21 Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?”

22 Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.
Matthew 18:21–22 (NIV)

56A Pentecost 15A Liturgy

[Email address]

56A Pentecost 15A Bible Study

Grace, Forgiveness and Love

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 13, 2020 | AFTER PENTECOST | PROPER 19 | YEAR A

Old Testament & Psalm, Option I

Old Testament Exodus 14:19–31

Psalm Psalm 114 or Exodus 15:1b–11, 20–21

or

Old Testament & Psalm, Option II

Old Testament Genesis 50:15–21

Psalm (Psalm 103:1–7) 8–13

New Testament Romans 14:1–12

Gospel Matthew 18:21–35¹

Matthew 18.21-35

Peter asks Jesus about the extent of forgiveness. Jesus answers with a funny – and chilling – parable about a man, who is forgiven much but who forgives very little, and is punished by his master for this attitude.

This week's resources explore: what an attitude of forgiveness really looks like.

Welcome and opening prayer

A gathering prayer

Our desire, our need, our yearning
draws us together to worship God.
Unexplainable, unimaginable,
unbelievable, incomprehensible love,
pulls at our heart strings,
tugs at our emotions,
turns our eyes beyond the seeing.
All-encompassing God, just as we are, we come.
Amen.

Reading

Matthew 18:21–35 (NIV)

²¹ Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?”

²² Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

¹ [Revised Common Lectionary](#). (2009). Bellingham, WA: Faithlife.

²³ “Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants.
²⁴ As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him.
²⁵ Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.
²⁶ “At this the servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’²⁷ The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.
²⁸ “But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded.
²⁹ “His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.’
³⁰ “But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt.³¹ When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.
³² “Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to.’³³ Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’³⁴ In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.
³⁵ “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

respond

For the word of the Lord

Thanks be to God

Present the Gospel

You need three people standing on steps or blocks so that they appear to be of different heights. In what follows, ‘1’ is the tallest, ‘2’ is the one in the middle, and ‘3’ is the shortest. The mimed actions accompany the reading of the text. (The presentation could be done with puppets, if available.)

verses 23-25 1 looks at 2 and crosses arms.

verse 26 2 kneels down in front of 1.

verse 27 2 stands up again.

verse 28 3 looks at 2 and crosses arms.

verse 29 3 kneels in front of 2.

verse 30 2 pushes 3 away; 3 falls over.

verse 32 1 bends down and helps 3 up.

verse 34 1 takes 2 away (offstage, or into a mock jail); 1 returns and raises 3 to where 2 had been standing.

Exegesis

Gospel: Matthew 18.21-35

What Jesus has just said (see last week) gives rise to Peter’s question: How often should I forgive the one who sins *against me*? There should be a limit, so Peter pitches ‘seven times’ – which sounds generous, and is more than suggested by contemporary rabbis who thought three would be enough. But Jesus tells him to stop counting. Forgiveness is a lifestyle not an equation.

The numbers plunge us into the Old Testament where we come face to face with the logic of Jesus’ response. Peter’s number echoes the seven-fold vengeance threatened to those who harm Cain. Jesus’ seventy times seven echoes the Jubilee at the heart of Old Testament life. Those living the Jubilee are perpetually forgiving.

To illustrate this, Jesus tells a parable that comes from the everyday world of life in the empire – the very world that the Jubilee was meant to regulate. It is a story at once funny and serious. The

amounts owed make the story fantastical and amusing. The attitude of the slave is chilling as we realise Jesus is talking about Peter – and us.

A talent was the largest unit of currency (actually a measure of weight, about 30kg, usually of silver) worth 6,000 denarii. A denarius was a good day's wage for a labourer. Myria (10,000, from where we get the word 'myriad') was the biggest number in Greek. So here Jesus is saying that this slave owed the biggest number of the largest unit of currency to his master. We might say that he owed zillions! Unable to pay such a debt, the slave throws himself on his master's mercy. The master's heart goes out to him ('took pity', v.27, is the same term that is used of Jesus in 9.36) and he writes off the entire amount. Wow! Having experienced such grace, the slave then demands that a colleague pay back the few pounds he owes him and throws him in jail when he doesn't.

Don't we cheer when the first slave gets his comeuppance! Yet, like Nathan's parable of the poor man's lamb (2 Samuel 12), we are cheering our own downfall. This, says Jesus, is the outcome of Peter's calculus. The parable serves to illustrate the foundational principle of relationships among disciples – namely that they are built on perpetual forgiveness.

The links between the lectionary readings

Relationships depend on forgiveness and focusing on what brings us together rather than what drives us apart. Joseph is the embodiment of a forgiving heart, and Paul argues that relationships within the church depend on us cutting each other some slack. The Gospel reading gets to the heart of the issue: the people of the kingdom live the Jubilee in their relationships with one another – forgiveness of debts and sins flow in equal measure.

Picture Pointers

- How many sweets do you think are in the jar?
- Is your 'jar' of forgiveness always full, like this one?
- What things can we do to nurture a forgiving attitude?



Live your faith

If anyone does something that annoys, angers, or upsets you this week, try not to react immediately. Stop, count to seven – or even seventy-seven! – and make a decision to forgive them.

End the session

A sending out prayer

Into a world of noise and confusion;
 into a world that bewilders and even bemuses us at times;
 into a world of delight and regret;
 into a world of hope and fear;
 into a world that is ever changing,
 we go with the message of an unchanging God
 who gave his all that we might live life to the best of our ability.
 God of all, go with us and within us,
 this and every day.
 Amen.