

**Here is what I love about Peter:**

It is always real with Peter. It is muddy, it is imprecise, it is nitty-gritty. Peter wants to talk about the unpleasant parts, the parts that don't make sense to him.

“Lord,” he says, “if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as 7 times?”

And notice: Peter is asking this question back before there was even a Church! We did not make this up, this ability to offend each other and need forgiveness did not begin here at 1900 N. D. St.! Way back in the very first group that followed Jesus, the questions came: how do I forgive a member of this community?

Now, the original hearers would know that **7 is a biblical number** that represents completeness, wholeness- the 7 days of creation, 7 pillars of Wisdom's house, 7 churches in Revelation. It was a big and impressive number for Peter to choose.

But Jesus says, “Not seven times, I tell you, but seventy-seven times.”  
And seeing the flummoxed look on Peter's face, he tells him a story.

The story is about a servant who is forgiven an unpayable debt by the king to whom he owes it. He is offered mercy, he is forgiven.

And he turns right around to someone who owes HIM a much smaller amount, and offers him no mercy whatsoever.

And the king, when he finds out, asks this question: **“Should not you have had mercy on your brother...as I had mercy on you?”**

The answer, obviously, is that he should have.

And so should we. **But like lots of things Jesus asks of us, this turns out to be harder than it looks.**

**There are 2 things you need to know about mercy:**

**1) It is a gift. If you haven't received it, you cannot give it away.**

The king offers mercy... but the servant never RECEIVES it, never believes it or is astonished or humbled or touched or transformed by it. The servant never receives it, and so has none of it inside to give away.

**2) On the other hand, if you HAVE received it- it flows from you like a miracle, like water.**

If you have received mercy, it begets gratitude and generosity and strength in your heart. It makes you able to do things you could not have imagined- including extending mercy to others.

**Peter is flummoxed because what Jesus suggests seems impossible. the Miracle of mercy is that receiving God's mercy makes the impossible possible. It transforms us.** It heals in us what we cannot ourselves heal by dint of will or vowing to forget.

**Mercy is gift that transforms us.** We see this in **12 step programs**, where people who are in bondage to addiction are restored- believing that we can be restored breaks the cycle. Receiving the acceptance we desperately need not only allows us new life, it allows us to help others know restoration, to live the same mercy we've received.

**The tragedy of Jesus' story** is that the slave, who is offered an enormous and astonishing gift, cannot receive it, take it in, integrate it.

And the truth is- this happens to us. Jesus offers us help and mercy and healing all the time, but often we miss it. **Often we need help to receive it.** A trusted counselor, a therapist, a sponsor or a support group- any of these can be the gift that can help us untangle the places where the pain is deep, where the rage and anger come from, help the healing to reach the places we most need it.

In the story, the servant is forgiven **10,000 talents-** which was an astonishing sum- roughly the daily wage of an average worker for 150 years! The amount HE, in turn, is asked to forgive is **something like a month's salary.** It is not pocket change, but there is no comparison between the utterly unpayable debt he is forgiven, and the amount he refuses to forgive.

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**Here is the really hard part of Peter's question. It is not about a stranger.** This is not, "how many times should I forgive the stranger who cuts me off on the freeway. The Greek word Peter uses is *adelphos*- "brother" (or "sister"). This is what is the really hard work: to forgive a Family Member. If it is a member of the community, someone we have let into our hearts and our lives- who has betrayed us, who has done the damage- then it is HARD to forgive them- in fact, without God's help, it is impossible. This is about you and me. We who have **shared communion at this table**, and sandwiches at the Hoe-down and hot dogs at Family Camp. This is about our brothers and sisters- the people we break bread with.

'70 times 7' often used to remind us that people make the same mistakes over and over. But perhaps it is better understood as a reference to the fact that **some things are impossible to do in one fell swoop.** Maybe 70x7 means practicing over and over to forgive the difficult thing that takes more than one try, that has more than one layer, that keeps bothering you.

"in the life of the community, **we will sometimes have to make multiple attempts** to forgive a single act of harm. I suspect that Jesus well knew that forgiveness is an act— and an art—that we would have to work at. Again. And again. And again."- *jan richardson paintedprayerbook.com*

OK- so we will sometimes have to make multiple attempts. **How do we begin?** We begin, I think, **by following Miriam's lead.** (picture at the top of bulletin) We begin by celebrating the mercy that has astonished us in our own lives. We begin by singing and dancing at the news that in spite of all our brokenness and resistance and sin, Christ has made a way for us to be whole. **Christ has given us the miracle of mercy.**

**Where has that mercy been real to you?** When the journey seemed impossible, when the waters threatened to swallow you up when the chariots were about to overtake you- Where has someone loved you and helped you make your way to dry land? **A great way to begin is to pick up a tambourine and practice gratitude-** because that's a direct way that mercy can heal your heart.

The passage ends by saying that the king will torture the unforgiving servant until he pays. I think this is **less a description of something God will DO, and more a description of how things really work.** When we refuse to forgive, we suffer. When we ignore the harm or pretend it didn't happen or cover it over, it festers and deepens and becomes worse. When we hold our pain and our woundedness close, then we grieve, and we shrivel, and we ache. It is in pardoning that we are pardoned.

**We torture ourselves when we refuse to forgive as we have been forgiven.** God simply permits it.

**Annie Lamott**, one of my favorite authors, says that refusing to forgive is like **eating rat poison and waiting for the rat to die.** Unforgiveness gets us nowhere.

**Unforgiveness gets us nowhere. It tortures us.**

There was an article on happiness this week in the LA times, featuring a couple who had decided to try several (very secular, very pragmatic) prescriptions for happiness like practicing gratitude, and slowing down. One of the prescriptions was forgiveness. The woman, it seems, had spent some time writing a long letter and working at forgiving her parents for a tumultuous childhood. She said, "I let go of a burden I did not even know I was carrying."

**\*\*One way to begin the task Jesus calls us to is to practice gratitude. Another is to work at it: to decide to stop torturing ourselves and to ask for help, to ask for healing, to ask for the ability to forgive.** Or to ask for the ability to be *willing* to forgive.

**We must be patient. It takes time.** In the case of deep wounds like abuse or addiction or betrayal, it is a slow process, and we need the Spirit's help. Like lots of things that Jesus asks us, this is harder than it looks.

But we forgive and extend mercy for our own sakes, and for God's sake, (not necessarily the sake of the transgressor.) We do it to keep our own souls healthy and whole. And we find the strength to do it because of the mercy WE have received, the burdens from which we have been freed, the grace that has been extended to us.

**If you haven't received it, you cannot give it**

**If, on the other hand, you receive it- you have it to give!** It flows from you like a gift, like a dance, like a song, like a miracle.

**Mercy is not something you manufacture, not something that will come if you clench your fists or grit your teeth hard enough.**

**It is a gift.**

**And the Miracle of Mercy is present for you here- at this table,**

**On this bright morning,  
In this gathering of imperfect and beloved people.**

We do not need to be flummoxed along with Peter.

We can, instead, dance along with Miriam-

“I will sing unto the Lord who has triumphed gloriously, the horse and rider have been thrown into the sea.”