

"70 x 7"

Exodus 14:19-31; Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35
September 17, 2017 -- 24th O. Time

Genesis 50:15-21

¹⁵Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers said, "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?" ¹⁶So they approached Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this instruction before he died, ¹⁷'Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.' Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. ¹⁸Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, "We are here as your slaves."¹⁹But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God?²⁰Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. ²¹So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones." In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

Romans 14:1-12

Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. {2} Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. {3} Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. {4} Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand. {5} Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. {6} Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God. {7} We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. {8} If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. {9} For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living. {10} Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. {11} For it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God." {12} So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

Matthew 18:21-35

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?" {22} Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times. {23} "For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. {24} When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; {25} and , as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. {26} So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' {27} And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. {28} But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, 'Pay what you owe.' {29} Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' {30} But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. {31} When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. {32} Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. {33} Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?' {34} And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. {35} So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

Joey Geary was arrested, tried and convicted for a crime which, as it turns out with the proof of new evidence he did not, as he had always contended, commit. Before the discovery Joey served 17 years on a life sentence. He was a very mild man who could have been and possibly should have been embittered by the experience. Early in his incarceration Joey met and began to study the bible with a fellow inmate who in point of fact did commit the crime for which he was now in prison. Over a year or two their friendship and faith began to grow. Joey's friend wrote long letters to the victims of his crimes, theft primarily, in which he would explain his change of heart and would seek their forgiveness. Some, well, a couple responded and one, in fact expressed that forgiveness. Which brought about an even deeper change and faithfulness in Joey's friend. Joey wished that he, in fact, had someone he could write for forgiveness, but he had committed no crime. Joey and his friend talked about how good forgiveness made him feel. Which led to an idea on Joey's part. Over the remainder of his incarceration, before being exonerated, Joey would monthly buy a small notebook at the prison commissary. He could be seen pulling out the notebook and writing in it. Only he and his friend knew what he was writing. It was noted that at stressful times, times that were personally challenging for Joey, he would take out the notebook and 'make some notes' and he would visibly become more calm and serene. Years went by and the day finally came when Joey heard the news that the great wrong which had befallen him had been corrected and he was to be released. On that day he embraced his friend and handed him the last notebook. He said, 'you take this. It made all the difference for me.' Later when cleaning out his cell corrections officers discovered a box of little notebooks. Everyone who had observed Joey wondered what they contained. What they discovered was a puzzle. Each page had marks on it. Hundreds of marks in groups of five. They thought at first that this was his crude way of marking time. But there were a thousand times more marks than the days of his incarceration. Finally, one of the officers approached Joey's friend. In his hand

was the last notebook in which he, too, had been making the marks. They asked and he explained. "Joey decided, or maybe God in Joey decided, that he needed to forgive those who wrongly put him in prison. Every time he felt bad, or every time he prayed, or just every time he thought about it, he'd take out his little notebook and make a mark. He'd forgive. And it made him feel better."

Peter asks Jesus, "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." Which in some translations is correctly '70 x 7' times. The number, of course not being so significant. Jesus being serious about forgiveness is.

We all know about forgiveness. It is something we personally thrive on, but are reticent to truly share. It is something we have come to rely on and expect from God, even to the point of assuming it, but at the same time something that we feel that we can withhold for almost any reason from those who seek it from us.

So, Jesus tells the story of a guy, nameless of course, who owes money to the king. What he owes is a considerable sum, probably a war debt or something like that. In fact, those who seem to know about such things say that this ten thousand talents is like saying he owes as much as can be owed, in fact, it may be impossible to even imagine how much ten thousand talents might be. It is Jesus own hyperbole. A sum meant to boggle the mind so that the forgiveness given would boggle the mind as well. **It was a huge debt.** No wonder, when he is called in by the king he is crying the blues. The king, a seemingly unforgiving sort, very austere and all business, orders him to be sold, along with his wife, children and everything he has. Which we know, even then, because the debt is HUGE wouldn't repay the king. So when the king forgives the debt. Wipes it clean. Doesn't even propose an easy payment plan. Lets it go. A gazillion bucks... forgiven.

Now, one would assume that a reasonable man would learn a valuable lesson from such grace, such magnanimous mercy that frees him from such a

close encounter with perdition? But dear listeners, Jesus is telling the story, and Jesus knows us pretty well. So, as they say, **the plot thickens.**

On the way home, walking about six inches above the ground, that is floating on air, the man, the freshly forgiven man, the man with no debt, the man who didn't have to trade in his Armani for a striped suit, runs into a guy that owes him 100 denari. Now, those same people who know such things say that 100 denari is about, oh, maybe a couple of bucks. Again, this is Jesus hypebole. An unpayable huge debt over against a pittance. Jesus wants even Peter to see how the scale is tipped. HUGE vs. minute! So again, one who is reasonable would surmise that his response to his debtor, will be much the same. (sigh) Uh, not so. Oh, that Jesus really knows how to spin a yarn. Instead, he grabs the guy by the throat, swears out a warrant for his arrest and has him thrown into prison until he can satisfy the debt.

Now a lot of those same people who know a lot about things biblical think that the original parable. The story Jesus told ends right here. And the rest of that business about the king taking back his kind offer for a note burning is added by someone else later.

Even if...It doesn't take a genius to figure out that what Jesus is trying to impress on us with this fantastic story, what we are being taught is that what we are supposed to do is forgive, no matter how tremendous or insignificant the debt, or the wrong that has been done to us. And that any debt we experience, as compared to the debt the king...GOD...forgives, is microscopic.

Why is forgiveness such a tough nut for us to crack? Maybe it is because of that which Paul warns us about in Romans as he continues to give instructions for the Christian life. Paul's point of the day is that we are not supposed to judge one another. That's God's business. But, we love to judge people, to appraise them, for whatever reason. And if we are wronged or perceive a wrong – watch out.

The truth is, even with Jesus showing the way by forgiving us, even with Jesus telling us in story and in actuality how to forgive,... 77 times he answers, which by the way for those who were unaccustomed to Jesus hyperbole was like saying we must forgive 10 gazzilion times....we just aren't very good at true forgiveness... . We can say the words...but do we really mean them?

In the whole of the biblical story, perhaps no one was abused as greatly as Jacob and Rebekah's boy. Stripped of his coat of many colors, thrown in a pit and sold into slavery is a pretty tough turn in life. But late in Genesis we read the postscript to this story. Joseph, who could have been, should have been, embittered by the whole dirty mess came to know, by faith, that it was all God's plan to save his family, and his people Israel from starvation. In one of the most endearing moments in the whole of scripture the brothers, begging for forgiveness on behalf of dear old dad come to Joseph. "Joseph wept when they spoke to him. Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, "We are here as your slaves." But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones." In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them." Joseph, God filled, forgave them.

So do we get it? Do we understand the key that unlocks the door? It's God that changes us. It's the faith that allows us to know we are forgiven and that to experience true grace we should, no matter how grievously wronged, forgive in return. In life being forgiven and forgiving allows us to live free. In the end, we are accountable only to God, who sent hyperbole into the world to forgive and save us.