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Pardon me, Sir

Exodus 14:19-31; Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35

So the theme in today's gospel is forgiveness. Ah, forgiveness. Let's get a few things straight about forgiveness right now.

We've got to look more closely at Jesus' answer to Peter's question in this gospel lesson today, and we've got to look more closely at the follow-up parable. This whole forgiveness business is not so cut-and-dried as it first seems. It's not always a simple transaction where Person One wrongs Person Two, and so Person Two forgives Person One, and now Person Two feels fine again -- although that simple transaction is one of the aspects of it.

But let's start with Peter's question and Jesus' answer. "Jesus, if a brother sins against me, will I need to forgive him, like, even *seven* times?" OK, whoa. We're already approaching doormat status here. Anyone who lets himself or herself be

hurt or trampled or offended seven times and just keeps coming back for more is just asking for it.

I mean we're all for second chances, and even third chances. I'm totally willing to let other people have a second chance. A third chance is harder, but I might do it if the person is truly repentant. But seven? Peter had to have been thinking that this number seven was a radical one that Jesus would affirm. Or maybe Jesus would at least clarify.

I think about our Culture of Revenge. It's thick out there. But we Christians, and even more broadly, we polite, educated, and generous North Shore people who have good resources in counseling and insight, we are often proud of our Counter-culture of Second and Third Chances. But seven? No, we walk away. If there's a jerk at church that keeps offending us, we'll decide after two or three times to either steer clear or join a new church. If our neighbors keep on

offending, we'll put up with it for awhile. But after that, we pattern our comings and goings to avoid them, or we sue. Maybe we even sell the house. If our spouse or partner cheats on us, we might be able to trust again and reconcile. A second time? Um, uh-oh. Seven times? That's pretty unrealistic. And no, we're not required to be doormats. God loves us too much for that. Tolerance of abuse only breeds more abuse. That's not God's will.

Jesus said to Peter, "Not seven times, but seventy-seven times you shall forgive." So obviously Jesus is talking about something way more than transactional. Jesus is trying to get Peter completely out of the realm of transactional forgiveness and into a whole way of being. If Person One wrongs Person Two, Person Two will have already been living in a permanent Stance of forgiving. Seventy-seven times just means, frankly, always.

We're not talking about a mere move from the Culture of Revenge to the Counter-culture of Second or Third Chances. We're talking about living in a

permanent Realm of Mercy and Pardon, which Jesus says straight out is the Kingdom of Heaven.

Jesus gives Peter a story to illustrate what the Kingdom of Heaven is like in this way. I notice several things here. The first character is a king who goes to settle accounts with the subjects who owe him. It's an unequal relationship, where the underling is indebted to the superior. It's the superior who forgives the debtor's debt. The person in power shows mercy and pardon to the person he has power over. The point of the story is, then, that the servant, the king's subject, is expected to show mercy and pardon to his fellow servant, his peers.

In other words, the person in power pardons the underling, and so fellow underlings should pardon their equals. Nowhere in this story is there a demand that an underling forgive a superior who has been abusive.

It's striking because I think from pulpits, whether the preacher actually says it or not, we listeners hear that we are supposed to forgive people who have hurt us out of their power over us: the abusive teacher, the cruel boss, the neglectful parent, the unjust judge, the corrupt official. But this is about something else.

This is about how superiors are to treat their underlings (with pardon, mercy, and understanding) and how we are to live and be with our own equals. The parable is quite clear on this matter.

Even the line from the Prayer that Jesus taught us goes, "Forgive us our trespasses (you O God who is above us) as we forgive those who trespass against us (we who are all on the same level)."

Now, obviously, we human beings are all equal in God's eyes. The President of the United States, or the Bishop of Chicago, or Oprah Winfrey, or the mean boss at work, in fact people of every age and race and circumstance are all human beings on the same human level. When I have been called in my life to "forgive"

someone who has been in authority over me and has hurt me terribly, one of the first things that has to happen is that I have to get that perspective. I have to get my head and my heart around the idea that this person in authority over me is a child of God just like me, that this person is human with hurts and hopes like everyone else. That's not easy always to do, especially when I keep thinking that this person should have known better, should have been paying attention.

Still, it's important to bear in mind that Jesus understood this dynamic. Living in the permanent realm of Pardon and Mercy means always seeing God as the one above pardoning us and showing us mercy, and seeing all fellow human beings as our equals to whom we then can work to understand, pardon, and likewise show mercy. Forgiving people who have power over us necessitates a move through a few more steps than forgiving people over whom we have power. Think about it. Isn't it easier to understand, pardon, and forgive a child or an employee than the other way around?

When I got my first job as a priest, I was fortunate enough to be working under an amazing rector named Clarence. My best professional mentor, Clarence let me watch him in action on a day-in day-out business of leading a church.

And he gave me freedom to take on tasks and projects of my own in the congregation. One time, I had taken on a project that was a big deal to me, something I didn't have much confidence in myself about, something I had begun to worry about although it was simply one small piece of congregational life in a big congregation. I found myself in a pickle at one point, and went to Clarence for help. He was always there for me, ready to listen to my blathering on, and always very encouraging.

This time, when I sat in his office and began to lay out this problem, I could tell he was looking at me puzzled. His face was totally blank, and I could see his eyes blinking at me in confusion. He had no idea what I was talking about. He had forgotten about my project! I was mad! How could he forget this big huge thing that was occupying my every energy? Didn't he care?

I eventually got over it. Clarence continues to be someone I go to for mentoring and advice. Clarence is one of my dearest friends and colleagues in ministry.

But that incident really made me angry. I felt hurt and devalued.

Of course, now I am a rector myself. Now I really get it. Now I understand how Clarence would have had seven hundred things on his mind that month, everything from Mrs. Carpenter's grave sickness to the Adult Forum that Sunday to the stress about the upset vestry member to the need to hire a new custodian.

Years later, as I have come to be an equal to Clarence's role in the church as a rector myself, I feel floods of pardon and mercy pouring forth. Walking in a person's shoes – or coming close to that – can transform our perspective and open up our ability to pardon and show mercy.

It's important to remember that the gospel does not demand that we "forgive" someone in power over us until we get to the point of somehow seeing them as an equal first.

Favorite preacher Barbara Brown Taylor has written, “How often should we forgive? Jesus tells us, ‘seventy-seven times.’ This is no chore. This is a promise because forgiveness is the way of life. It is God’s cure for the deformity our resentments cause us. It is how we discover our true shape, and every time we do it we get to be a little more alive. What God knows and we don’t yet is that once we get the hang of it, seventy times seven won’t be enough, not to mention seventy-seven times. We’ll be so carried away by it that we’ll hope it never ends.”

Dear people of St. Elisabeth’s Church: You are totally forgiven by your Superior in Heaven. You are loved even when you don’t deserve it. Go and do likewise.