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“Breathing Deeply the Air of Grace”

A sermon by Mark E. Diehl

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Psalm 32, Matthew 18:21-35

“How often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him?” For Peter, this question must have been troubling him for some time. If a child or friend asked us that question, wouldn’t we wonder what was behind it?

The question is not one of forgiving or not forgiving. It assumes that forgiving is the standard. The teaching of Jesus and the understanding of the church is clear: faith in God is relevant *for those defective in performance, not those who are perfect*. As Jesus said about himself: “It is not the well who have need of a physician but the sick; the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost.”

Questions like this emerge from the difficult and complicated cases, situations that are chronic and habitual: people who repeatedly wrong another; if not the same problem, then a stream of problems from the same troublesome person.

“How often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him?” Peter poses a question that many of us ask as well. We need not look too far or deep among our relationships before we find such words on our lips. People disappoint, and often those who disappoint are people from whom we expect more.

I’m really glad Peter asked that question. Underlying it are several other questions you and I pose because they touch upon the parallel issues.

Questions like: “Is there an opportunity at some point for me to finally return to a particular person all the trouble they have given me?” I suppose you might call that the “revenge” motive. Yet most of us are more sophisticated than that. Instead we may be hoping for a “reap what you sow” outcome, and we hope “what goes around, comes around” is really true.

Or the question might be of a different sort. We recognize our very human limits; our endurance and long-suffering become depleted and exhausted. Asking that question may be a way to ask: “Is there a point at which we just become worn down and worn out and can no longer give and forgive because we know our limits?” That is an important question to ask.

Or how about this question: “Do we take seriously the offense that has occurred?” There are some gosh-awful things that people do to one another. Great harm has been done. Forgiveness can appear weak and ineffectual because it seems to indulge the offender and dismiss the wounds of the victim.

I have encountered those in counseling who are seething inside with anger and frustration. They don’t know why they are depressed.

Some offense against them occurred, and they say they have forgiven the offender, but when one probes beneath the surface, the person is unaware of how deeply that hurt has penetrated their soul. Hurt unacknowledged can never be hurt healed. You and I know those who say when they’re offended: “Oh, it’s nothing, no harm done.” And the truth is that great harm has been done.

In asking the question how often to forgive, perhaps what is being asked is: Do we take seriously the offense that has occurred?

Or there may be concern for the wrongdoer and for the welfare of the community that may be victimized. Don’t we need to place limits on the behavior of the offender? The wrong needs to be made clear so the situation doesn’t continue. We draw a line in the sand so that others may be protected, and perhaps the perpetrator can learn appropriate behavior. It really is in the offender’s best interest that we put a stop to it.

All of these issues I believe are related to the question, “How often shall we forgive?” We, like Peter, want to know.

And Jesus gives an answer. “You say forgive seven times? That seems generous enough. But I tell you 70 times 7—that’s how many times you are to forgive.” It is a shocking and unsatisfying answer. If you are like me, I lose count at about 236, and then I have to start all over.

So shocking was this answer that Jesus felt compelled to tell a parable in explanation. In fact, he sharpens the challenge by seemingly making our own forgiveness dependent upon our forgiving others. “So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart.”

Ouch!!

The parable goes like this: A servant owed a huge sum of money, so much that he would have to live several lifetimes to pay it off. His master was clearing accounts and called his servant to make good on the debt. Not being able to pay, the servant and his family and all their property are ordered to be sold in order to pay off the debt. Imploring the master, the servant cries out, “Please, more time, I will pay back every cent.” And the master is moved by pity, knowing that the servant can never repay the entire amount, and so the master forgives the debt. From bankruptcy to financial freedom in a matter of seconds. What remarkably good fortune!

So the servant strolls out, light as a feather, and whom does he encounter but a colleague who owes him just a couple of bucks. The newly debt-free servant says to his friend, “You borrowed some money from me the other day—pay up.” “I can’t pay you today; give me more time.” But the servant loses his patience and has the other thrown into debtors’ prison. Word gets back to the master, and he calls before him the forgiven servant. “Did I forgive you so much, and yet you did not forgive a little?”

For Peter and all the followers of Christ, Jesus broadens the scope and the context in which forgiveness is lived out. What is at stake is not only the forgiveness of another but our very own forgiveness. Jesus taught this to his disciples in the prayer we pray: “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” We cannot be free as isolated individuals; our freedom is part of the wider reality that exists in all our relationships and interactions.

Does this mean that God’s forgiveness of us becomes dependent upon our ability or capacity or willingness to forgive others? That seems to contradict our understanding of the free grace and mercy of God in Christ.

So often we consider forgiveness to be a one-off event. It isn’t. God does not say, “I forgive you once, but henceforth you are on your own.” God doesn’t say that. Every moment of life is based on the forgiving grace of God. Forgiveness is the initial act that frees us, and it’s the continuing reality in which we remain as God’s beloved children.

An analogy that helps me understand this is that forgiveness is like the air we breathe. Constantly we take it in and out. To accept forgiveness but not to exercise forgiveness is like trying to deprive others of the oxygen in our atmosphere. If I were able to remove the oxygen from the atmosphere, I would suffer just as surely as those I wanted to punish.

How often does my brother, my sister need to be forgiven? How often do you need to take a breath? Constantly. Life quickly comes to an end without it.

Frederick Buechner in his book *Wishful Thinking* notes the challenge of both repentance and forgiveness.

To forgive someone is to say to someone... “You have done something unspeakable, and by all rights, I should call it quits between the two of us. Both my pride and my principles demand no less. However, although I make no guarantees that I will be able to forget what you have done, and although we may both carry the scars for life, I refuse to let it stand between us. I still want you to be my friend.”

That is challenging indeed. But Buechner continues:

To accept forgiveness means to admit that you have done something unspeakable that needs to be forgiven. Thus both parties [the forgiver and the forgiven] must swallow the same thing: their pride.

Buechner reveals a deep truth about forgiveness: it is a freedom, a liberation, a release not for not only the one who had done wrong but also for the one who has been wronged. The challenge of repentance and forgiveness is that for the offender and the offended: both must let go of something.

Most folks probably don't know this about me, but for 8 years, I lived in a small 19-room motel in West Texas. My parents owned and operated it. It was a wonderful 8 years in my young life.

The wonderful part of that experience wasn't the part about living in a motel, but that the motel had a swimming pool. From late elementary through high school, this kid loved having a pool right outside my door.

The pool was the location of much of our play during the year: games, competitions among siblings or friends, or just hanging out. One particular competition was how far one could swim underwater with only one breath. Could we make it two lengths of the pool, three lengths, maybe even four? And I got pretty good at it.

But no matter how far you went, when you got to the end of your breath, you came up gasping for air. It almost hurt to force the air in so quickly, but you were grateful to grab the side of the pool and breathe in deeply the air you had deprived yourself of in your attempt to be the best.

Whether we swim or not, this is a game many of us still play. I see it in myself and I see it in the church. How far can you and I go on just one breath? Most of the time, I am a pretty good person, so I don't need much grace. Some of us have

gotten so good at the game that we are disappointed when others appear so needy. And we are horrified when we find ourselves coming up gasping for air.

Yet Jesus calls all of us to understand how essential the air of grace is to our lives. How difficult that can be for us. We expect too much or too little. We demand perfection from those we know to be imperfect: our friends, our foes, ourselves. Our cynicism runs high for those who are different from us, blinding us from anything but our prejudices. We keep others at a distance and refuse to see ourselves in every person we encounter.

Yet Jesus speaks clearly that before God, we are all the same, all in need of grace, all called to be instruments of forgiveness. The human community finds its greatest fulfillment and harmony when we understand and accept and practice the truth about ourselves as God sees us. We are broken people who are held by the grace of God.

How often shall I forgive? Seven times? Peter was asking about the hard cases, the chronic ones.

Turns out *we* are the hard cases, every one of us. How often shall I forgive? Well, how often do I need to take a breath?

Some of us may be able to hold our breath longer than others. But in the end, holding your breath is only a game. You see, we must all breathe deeply the air of grace. We must take it in and out on a constant basis. It is truly the only way we can live together, and it is the only way we may live together in the grace of God.