

SERMON 16th SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, SEPTEMBER 16TH 2026

“Forgiveness” Based on Gen. 50:15-21 and Matthew 18: 21-35

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For the past three months in the Bible study group, some of us have been spending time looking at some of Jesus’ parables. And during this journey, you may have noticed that some of Jesus’ stories are not always easy to understand. They can be strange, surprising, and sometimes even confusing. There can be many layers of meaning, and we may find ourselves wondering, “What exactly is Jesus trying to tell us through His parable?”

But the parable that Kathy read for us today from Matthew 18 is a little different. The message is quite clear. Jesus is talking about forgiveness, and its importance within our life as a community.

Friends in Christ, we all know very well that whenever people live together, whether it is a family, a church, a neighbourhood, or even a nation. There might be time when we hurt one another, misunderstand each other, or simply say things we later regret. And when that happens, forgiveness becomes essential. Without forgiveness, hurt can turn into resentment. Resentment can turn into conflict. And conflict, if it is left unresolved, can slowly break a community apart.

And that’s probably why Peter came up to Jesus with his question that started the passage we read today:

"Peter asks Jesus, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” (Matt. 18:21)

Peter probably thinks he is giving Jesus a very good answer for his own question. Perhaps he is thinking, surely seven times is enough! He might think that Jesus would ask him to give other people a second, third, and fourth chance, but there should be a limit, 7 seems like a generous number.

But Jesus responds in a way Peter probably does not expect. Jesus says, “*Not seven times, but seventy-seven times*” or, as some translations say, “seventy times seven.” (Matt. 18:22).

Here, Jesus is not asking Peter to keep a notebook and count how many times he has forgiven someone. I’m unsure if there is any special meaning behind the number 490, but one thing is clear: that is a lot of times to forgive! Imagine trying to keep track “*That’s number 487... 488... 489... Okay, one more time, and then I’m done!*”

Of course, that is not what Jesus is asking Peter to do.

Jesus here teaching Peter and us, as readers today, not to keep score when it comes to forgiveness. Instead of counting how many times we have forgiven someone, Jesus invites us simply to keep choosing forgiving.

And then Jesus tells the parable of a king and his servants to help us understand why.

The forgiveness that the king gives to his servant symbolizes the forgiveness that we ourselves have received from God. Ten thousand bags of gold is an enormous amount of money, far more than the servant could ever realistically repay.

The story reminds us that we are people who have been forgiven for our sins, debts that we could never repay on our own. God has shown us mercy far beyond anything we could ever earn or deserve. And because we have received that kind of grace, Jesus calls us to extend that same grace and forgiveness to one another.

We all know and have experience that forgiveness can take time. But we cannot build a healthy community if we hold tightly to every hurt and refuse to let go. If God's forgiveness toward us has no limit, then Jesus invites us to become people who are also willing to forgive—not because the hurt does not matter, but because God's grace is greater than our hurt.

And I think this is where our Gospel reading and our Old Testament reading meet each other.

Jesus tells Peter that forgiveness cannot simply be reduced to a number. It is not about keeping a record of how many times we have forgiven someone. Here, Jesus invites us to remember how much we ourselves have been forgiven.

And then we come to the story of Joseph and his brothers.

At first glance, Genesis 50 feels almost like an epilogue to the Joseph story. The drama seems to be over. Joseph and his brothers have been reunited. Their family has survived the famine. Their father, Jacob, has died and after Jacob dies, the brothers become afraid.

Genesis 50:15 says, *“When Joseph’s brothers saw that their father was dead, they 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?’”*

The brothers know what they did to Joseph in the past. They remember throwing him into a pit, and selling him into slavery. They remember watching their own brother being taken away and doing nothing to stop it.

So now, as Joseph is the one who have power not only over them but over a lot of people. They are afraid of Joseph. Even though they have been living together and experienced Joseph's kindness for couple years before their dad passed away. They also have survived the famine because Joseph was literally helping them. But underneath all of that, there is still something unresolved. The reconciliation was incomplete.

And perhaps, this incomplete reconciliation was what we experience in our relationship with other people today. We can sit in the same room. We can shake hands. We can smile at one another. We can even say, "I forgive you." But deep inside, the wound may still be there.

Sometimes we forgive with our words, but our hearts are still afraid. And sometimes, when we are the ones who have done something wrong, we carry our guilt for so long that we cannot imagine that the other person could truly forgive us.

Joseph's brothers are still carrying the past. They even offered themselves as slaves for Joseph to make sure Joseph knows that they are powerless and relying on Joseph' kindness. And Joseph could have taken advantage of that moment. He could have think that it's his turn to make his brothers' life miserable. Because by every human measure, Joseph had the power to seek revenge.

But instead, Joseph does something unexpected. Genesis tells us that at that very moment, Joseph wept. (Matt. 18: 17) Joseph then says to them: *"Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God?"* (Matt. 18:19)

"Am I in the place of God?"

Joseph is not saying that what his brothers did was okay. He does not pretend that the betrayal never happened. But he refuses to put himself in God's place and become judge and executioner of his brothers.

And then he says something that has become one of the most memorable statements in the entire Joseph story: *"Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good."* (Matt. 18:20)

Joseph tells the truth about what happened. He is aware that what his brothers did was harmful for him. But Joseph also believes that God is not finished with the story when he was left and sold as slave.

Friends in Christ, from Joseph's story, we can see that the evil his brothers intended did not have the final word. What they intended for harm, God was able to transform and use for good. God did not erase Joseph's painful past, but God showed Joseph that his past did not have to determine his future.

And perhaps this is one of the most difficult things about forgiveness. Forgiveness does not mean pretending that the past never happened. It means choosing not to let the past have complete control over our future.

Joseph could have allowed the betrayal of his brothers to define the rest of his life and how he treat them later in his life. Instead, he chose mercy. He chose to trust that God could still do something beautiful with a story that had begun with so much pain and betrayal.

So perhaps the question for us to reflect on today is simply:

What does forgiveness look like for us?

At the heart of Christian forgiveness is an invitation not to let the worst thing someone has done to us become the thing that controls the rest of our lives. We may not be able to change what happened, but with God's help, we can choose how we will carry it into the future.

For some of us, the person we need to forgive may be someone else, near or far from us. Perhaps there is still a hurt, a disappointment, or a broken relationship that we have been carrying for a long time. For others, forgiveness may mean learning to receive God's grace for ourselves. Perhaps we are still carrying guilt or shame over something we did in the past, and we have not yet allowed ourselves to believe that God truly forgives us.

And just as Joseph trusted that God could bring good out of a painful story, we are invited to trust that God's grace can meet us in those places too. In the places where we have been hurt, where we have failed, and where relationships have been broken.

Forgiveness is not always easy, and it does not always happen all at once. Sometimes it is a decision we have to make again and again, 70 times 7. But we do not walk this journey alone. The same God who has forgiven us, who has stayed with us through our brokenness, and who continues to bring new life out of our stories, walks with us as we learn to forgive.

May we remember how much we have been forgiven, receive God's grace for ourselves, and have the courage to extend that grace to others. And may God help us release what we cannot change and heal what has been wounded.

Amen.