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## *Forgiveness Is The Eraser!*

**A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler  
Proper 19 – Year A**

*Then Peter came and said to 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." (Matthew 18:21-22)*

Seven times? Seven *plus* seventy times? Seven *times* seventy times? That would be four hundred and ninety times!

Some of us have lost count since March 13, 2020. We have all been in cooped up isolation, in pandemic quarantine, for exactly six months now. Close quarters, and closed quarters. We've stopped counting the days. But it is, roughly, thirty days in a month, times six. That is 180 days. It's half a year. Okay, that's enough. It's enough times, now.

*There must be some kind of way outa here, said the joker to the thief.  
There's too much confusion. I can't get no relief.*

(Jimi Hendrix sang it better than the song's writer, Bob Dylan; but they both sang it better than me!)

It's been a long haul.

A few weeks after of our world's pandemic quarantine of 2020 began, I preached that we were all in a kind of unintentional spiritual retreat. A hard one, but one which could also be valuable. We were learning some things about ourselves, and about our companions and partners and housemates – but especially about ourselves, if we were paying attention and listening to the right guides.

But, wow, one of the things we have had to face has certainly been forgiveness, the subject of our gospel passage today. Each of us, every one of us, has had to do a lot of forgiveness-asking, haven't we?

I don't care how wonderful your relationships are, or your marriage is, or your household is, or your friends and family are. One of the primary features of these last six months has been learning to live together, in close quarters with people. Or, if we are single, in close quarters with our self!

That has inevitably, *inevitably*, meant making a lot of mistakes, getting on a lot of nerves, lashing out in impatience again and again, lashing out in what we hope are short bursts of anger, speaking so many careless comments! Yes, careless comments.

When the little boy is told by his mother that he has to brush his teeth tonight, and wash his face, he replies, "But I brushed them last night! I washed it last night. How many times do I have to do it?" When the woman gently complains to her husband that he hasn't told her that he loves her, he says, "Yes, I did. I told you a couple of weeks ago that I loved you. How many times do I have to do it?"

Every one of us, at some age or another, learns this lesson: The things worth doing in this life, have to be done again and again. We learn something, something wonderful. We do something, something wonderful. And then we have to do it again, as if it is a practice, over and over again.

The things worth doing in this life are never accomplished in just one sitting. The things that count in life, the values that form us, the activities that create our character, the disciplines that form our bodies – all these things become real when they become habits for us, practices, not one-time superstar events.

We have to wash our face more than once. We have to say “I love you,” more than once. We have to exercise, we have to eat well, more than once. In fact, we have to do those things regularly, almost daily, really, if we want to make those activities real in our lives.

Well, it's the same thing with spirituality. Spirituality is not a one-time miraculous event that changes our lives completely and forever, without our ever having to worry about it again. Effective spirituality is a practice, a habit, a routine.

That is why, when Peter asks Jesus whether he (Peter) should forgive as many as seven times, Jesus replies, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times” (Matthew 18:22). Jesus means that forgiveness is an ongoing act, even a perpetual act. Maybe like washing your face, or saying, “I love you.” One time won't do it. Nor will seven. Not even seventy-seven times.

It's been a long journey. It's been a long haul. How long will this keep going on? How often do we have to forgive? Seven times? Seventy Times Seven Times? (That would be 490 times, about once a day for a year and a half.)

There's a lot of talk now about “Zoom Fatigue.” Many of us are tired of straining and stressing at images of people on video screens. But a lot of us have also had to deal with “Forgiveness Fatigue!” These last six months have also been like living in a petri dish, living with mistakes and forgiveness, anger and reconciliation. Good old Saint Peter was right. He saw it coming. How often do we have to forgive?

It helps to understand forgiveness as a kind of release. The word, “to forgive,” means to release something, or someone –maybe even ourselves. And it is the strange nature of humanity that we seem always to be getting tangled up, knotted up, tied up in things. We start the day clear and fresh. But then we get tangled up. Relationships get cross ways. Impatience and anger grab us. We make careless comments. Soon, we need release.

There are lots of names and images we use for the church. The church is a body, a congregation, a community – yes, all those things. But I have another favorite image for “Church.” The church is a “Laboratory.” The church is a laboratory for forgiveness.

The church is where we test, and experiment with, and practice forgiveness. Over time, it is the church where we learn how to forgive, and where we learn how to be forgiven. This is because there are so many mistakes in church, and so much imperfection, all in the same place where people generally want to do the right thing. And yet, we don't, over and over again, and all on top of each other.

Let me tell you a secret: Forgiveness is the way I determine how often someone goes to church. A lot of people claim that they are spiritual, or that they are Christian, or that they are members of a church. But I can never tell by what they say. I can tell people who go to church by how they are able to forgive and be forgiven. Yes, for me, the key evidence of whether someone goes to church, is whether they know how to forgive, whether they have learned forgiveness in the great laboratory of forgiveness, the church. Those who attend faithfully are comfortable with forgiveness.

Of course, forgiveness makes all of us uncomfortable; but it makes some people truly uncomfortable. There are people, I have heard, who claim that they have never had to ask for forgiveness, or never asked for forgiveness.

Yes, forgiveness is the best evidence that someone attends church, or is a Christian. If we do not understand forgiveness, we haven't really understood Christianity yet.

Well, in some weird sense, we have all been in various laboratories of forgiveness lately. We have been on top of each other, living in petri dishes, and not really knowing what else is living here with us, at the same time. And dealing with those very real things: diseases and strengths, mistakes and solutions.

Oh, and if you live by yourself, you don't escape this laboratory! Your laboratory might be online, on one of the various social media platforms on the internet. You know what they are. And the old, offline, ways are still available for us to make careless comments.

Each of them is another opportunity for us to say something wrong, or unkind, or even sinful. In fact, some of the algorithms of those online platforms seem to be weighted toward the sensational and sensationalist, the divisive and antagonistic. It's how those platforms drive us to crave more.

It is hard for those social media platforms to deliver forgiveness. I suppose that they, too, can be laboratories, or tests, for how we want to live in this world. Do we want to live in impatience, and short outbursts of anger?

All forgiven people get tempted by these opportunities to lash out against someone else. That is exactly the tragedy of today's gospel parable in the Book of Matthew. The forgiven servant is grateful, but he immediately loses that gratitude by not being able to pass on the forgiveness, the release. He was released, but he cannot release another; instead, he attacks the other, and binds the other. He has not learned from church community, the laboratory of forgiveness.

Forty years ago, I studied with a man named Henri Nouwen. He was my Professor of Spirituality, though that is an odd combination of words. I remember a particular story, a political story, he often told. It was about compassion, but I think it could also describe forgiveness.

Apparently, in the politically tumultuous 1960s and 70s, Henri Nouwen and a group of pastoral theologians visited Senator and former Vice-President of the United States, Hubert Humphrey. They asked him about compassion in politics. Here is how Nouwen tells it:

*"One day, the three of us visited the late Senator Hubert Humphrey to ask him about compassion in politics. We had come because we felt he was one of the most caring human beings in the political arena. The Senator, who had just finished talking with the ambassador of Bangladesh, and obviously expected a complaint, a demand, or a compliment, was visibly caught off guard when asked how he felt about compassion in politics.*

*Instinctively, he left his large mahogany desk, over which hung the emblem reminding visitors that they were speaking with the former Vice-President of the United States, and joined us around a small coffee table. But then, after having adapted himself to the somewhat unusual situation, Senator Humphrey walked back to his desk, picked up a long pencil with a small eraser at its end, and said in his famous high-pitched voice,*

*"Gentlemen, look at this pencil. Just as the eraser is only a very small part of this pencil and is used only when you make a mistake, so compassion is only called upon when things get out of hand. The main part of life is competition, only the eraser is compassion. It is sad to say, gentlemen, but in politics compassion is just part of the competition...."* (Henri J. M. Nouwen, Donald P. McNeill, and Douglas A. Morrison, *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life*. New York: Image Books, 1982. pp. 5-6).

That image of an eraser stays with me, even though the story reveals something discouraging about politics, from a politician who was known as being compassionate!

Compassionate people know how to use the eraser. Forgiveness is that eraser. Forgiveness is the eraser! Learning how to forgive means learning how to erase. Sadly, social media posts are often the pencil! Every careless comment can be a sharp pencil! Is there even such a thing as an eraser on social media? I don't know. Is there even such a thing as an eraser in politics?

But there is such a thing as forgiveness in church. The church is a grand laboratory for forgiveness. Where we learn forgiveness seven times seventy times. And, if we are paying attention, our families and households are the same spiritual laboratories, where we learn to forgive and where we learn how to be forgiven. Both sides of the forgiveness are critical: giving forgiveness and receiving forgiveness. Giving release, and receiving release.

To forgive means to release. It is truly one of the major principles of the Christian life. To release. For, when we release others, we suddenly feel ourselves released, too. When we let go of what we believe people owe us, then it is we who feel wonderfully free. The way God sets people free, is by using people to do it! God uses us to set his people free.

Once? Seven times? Seventy-seven times? Yes. Yes to all those numbers. And Yes to a lifetime of release. It is like washing our face, like saying "I love you." When those acts become practices and habits, they become part of who we are. And when forgiveness becomes part of who we are, we are close to the heart of God.

AMEN.

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