

Sermon: Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 19, Year A
Matthew 18:21–35
By the Rev. Alfredo Feregrino
St. Luke's ~ San Lucas Episcopal Church
Date: September 13, 2026

A few years ago, when I was in Jerusalem as part of my pilgrimage to the Holy Land, I had the opportunity to hear the stories of redemption of two of the co-founders of “Combatants for Peace,” which is a grassroots movement of Palestinian and Israeli people who once took part in the cycle of violence and now work together to break that cycle.

There, in the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem, we heard the stories of redemption of two of the organization’s co-founders. Their stories were powerful testimonies of what can happen when people choose to step away from violence, hatred, and revenge and instead work together toward reconciliation and peace.

One of the co-founders is Palestinian, Bassam Aramin, and the other one is Israeli, Rami Elhanan.

Both of them lost their ten-year-old daughters.

The Palestinian girl was shot by an Israeli soldier while standing outside her school with some classmates. The Israeli girl was killed by a bomb set off by Palestinians.

Both fathers carried a picture of their daughters in their wallets.

What was especially striking in their stories is how openly they expressed the pain and suffering caused by the violence between their two peoples. It took remarkable courage for both men to face that painful history and to speak honestly about it.

And yet, by the end of their conversation, there was a glimpse of hope and redemption.

Through their willingness to forgive one another, they show that a different way of living is possible, a new world order in which violence, hatred, and revenge do not have the final word.

In the Gospel that we heard today, Peter comes to Jesus and asks: *“Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?”*

Peter even proposes an answer: *“As many as seven times?”* And Jesus responds: *“Not seven times, but seventy-seven times.”* Seventy-seven times.

Jesus’ pronouncement is not a matter of mathematics. It is a matter of the nature of forgiveness. This kind of forgiveness is beyond calculation. Jesus suggests that there must be no limit to our willingness to forgive.

Unlimited forgiveness is what marks the new order inaugurated by Jesus—the new order in which Bassam, the Palestinian, and Rami, the Israeli, are trying to live.

So, what is forgiveness?

Forgiveness is blocking our instinct to strike back in anger.

Forgiveness involves letting go of our desire for retribution and revenge.

Forgiveness means refusing to allow the wrong that was done to us to have the final word over our lives.

Forgiveness means refusing to let another person's violence continue to live inside us.

So, I wonder what the reaction would be of any of us if we were in the same shoes as Bassam, the Palestinian.

Could we imagine asking Jesus:

“Lord, how many times should I forgive the Israeli soldier who killed my daughter?”

Or if we were in the shoes of Rami, the Israeli:

“Lord, how many times should I forgive those responsible for the bomb that killed my daughter?”

Seventy-seven times, Jesus would say.

I know that Jesus’ response is and will be extremely difficult for anyone who has suffered such a horrible loss to understand. Right?

And like the story of *Combatants for Peace*, we have many, many stories like that to tell.

Lord, how many times should I forgive those responsible for killing Black lives?

Lord, how many times should I forgive those responsible for acts of terrorism and the killing of innocent people?

Lord, how many times should I forgive when violence is committed against immigrants and refugees simply because of who they are or where they come from?

And perhaps the hardest question of all:

Lord, how many times should I forgive when I am still angry, when the wound is still open?

These are not easy questions.

And yes, Jesus does not tell us that forgiveness is easy.

But Jesus does tell us that forgiveness is the way of the Kingdom of God.

So, I wonder: Is there someone in your life now who needs your forgiveness?

Is there someone whose name comes to your mind when you hear Jesus say, “Forgive”?

And perhaps there is another question we need to ask: Can we truly receive God’s forgiveness if we are unwilling to extend forgiveness to others?

This is where the Lord’s Prayer becomes so relevant.

Every week we pray: “Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.”

Notice the connection.

We ask God to forgive us as we forgive others. In a way, this is a twofold movement, a double movement.

It is our task not only to forgive those we believe have harmed/injured us, but also to seek forgiveness from those whom we have harmed/injured.

The Lord’s Prayer reminds us that forgiveness is not simply something we receive from God. It is something that transforms the way we live with one another.

Yes, the essential point here is that we are invited to act toward others as God has acted toward us.

And this is exactly what we see in the parable of the king and the servant. The servant receives an extraordinary amount of mercy. His enormous debt is forgiven. But then he turns around and refuses to extend that same mercy to another person. He has received forgiveness, but he has not allowed forgiveness to transform his heart.

And perhaps that is the warning Jesus gives us. Yes, Jesus always invites us into something different, a change of heart, a transformation that moves us beyond our old ways of thinking and acting.

So, going back to my original story, the stories of these brave men from Combatants for Peace teach us that when forgiveness truly comes from the heart, it can open a path toward healing, reconciliation, and peace.

You know, forgiveness is not only a gift to the other person.

Forgiveness is also a gift to ourselves.

Forgiveness can liberate us from the draining effects of resentment and anger.

But know that forgiveness may not erase the wound. But forgiveness can prevent the wound from becoming the center of our lives.

Forgiveness is at the heart of Jesus' Gospel. Forgiveness is an act of ultimate love. Forgiveness is an act of divine love. And forgiveness is a gift from God and as a gift, it is meant to be shared with others.

To conclude, I would like to offer a brief remark that Paulo Coelho, a Brazilian writer, made in an interview:

He said, when you have died and are face to face with God, God is not going to ask:

Did you sin a lot? Did you do this? Or: Did you do that?

God is going to ask you one simple question: "Did you love enough?"

Perhaps that is the question that Jesus places before us today.

Did you love enough to forgive when someone else wounded you?"

And did you love enough to ask for forgiveness when you were the one who caused the wound?

Yes, forgiveness, in the end, is an act of ultimate love.

A love that does not originate in us alone, but comes from God.

A love that we receive.

A love that transforms us.

And a love that God invites us to share.

Amen.

A Note from the Preacher

Because sermons are meant to be preached and therefore prepared with emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., they are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.