

## **Exodus 14:19-31**

19 God's messenger, who had been in front of Israel's camp, moved and went behind them. The column of cloud moved from the front and took its place behind them.

20 It stood between Egypt's camp and Israel's camp. The cloud remained there, and when darkness fell it lit up the night. They didn't come near each other all night.

21 Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The LORD pushed the sea back by a strong east wind all night, turning the sea into dry land. The waters were split into two.

22 The Israelites walked into the sea on dry ground. The waters formed a wall for them on their right hand and on their left.

23 The Egyptians chased them and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and cavalry.

24 As morning approached, the LORD looked down on the Egyptian camp from the column of lightning and cloud and threw the Egyptian camp into a panic. 25 The LORD jammed their chariot wheels so that they wouldn't turn easily. The Egyptians said, "Let's get away from the Israelites, because the LORD is fighting for them against Egypt!"

26 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea so that the water comes back and covers the Egyptians, their chariots, and their cavalry." 27 So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. At daybreak, the sea returned to its normal depth. The Egyptians were driving toward it, and the LORD tossed the Egyptians into the sea.

28 The waters returned and covered the chariots and the cavalry, Pharaoh's entire army that had followed them into the sea. Not one of them remained. 29 The Israelites, however, walked on dry ground through the sea. The waters formed a wall for them on their right hand and on their left.

30 The LORD rescued Israel from the Egyptians that day. Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore.

31 Israel saw the amazing power of the LORD against the Egyptians. The people were in awe of the LORD, and they believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses.

## **Matthew 18:21-35**

21 Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, how many times should I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Should I forgive as many as seven times?"

22 Jesus said, "Not just seven times, but rather as many as seventy-seven times. 23 Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants.

24 When he began to settle accounts, they brought to him a servant who owed him ten thousand bags of gold.

25 Because the servant didn't have enough to pay it back, the master ordered that he should be sold, along with his wife and children and everything he had, and that the proceeds should be used as payment.

26 But the servant fell down, kneeled before him, and said, 'Please, be patient with me, and I'll pay you back.'

27 The master had compassion on that servant, released him, and forgave the loan.

28 “When that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him one hundred coins. He grabbed him around the throat and said, ‘Pay me back what you owe me.’

29 “Then his fellow servant fell down and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I’ll pay you back.’

30 But he refused. Instead, he threw him into prison until he paid back his debt.

31 “When his fellow servants saw what happened, they were deeply offended. They came and told their master all that happened.

32 His master called the first servant and said, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you appealed to me.

33 Shouldn’t you also have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?’

34 His master was furious and handed him over to the guard responsible for punishing prisoners, until he had paid the whole debt.

35 “My heavenly Father will also do the same to you if you don’t forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

## **Sermon**

Lord, open my lips and my mouth will declare your praise.

Lord, open our hearts, and our lives will sing out your name.

Amen.

There's three questions that I hope this sermon answers:

What do these readings tell us about God? What do these readings tell us about us? What do these readings encourage us to do in light of that knowledge? Those questions guide today's focus, and a single theme binds them all together: forgiveness.

Of course, though, these readings inspire more questions, and seemingly different questions than I've just asked. Questions like: What's the limit of God's forgiveness? What's the limit of our forgiving? And why are we, like Peter, always looking for the time when we can stop forgiving?

Egyptians being swallowed in the Red Sea certainly seems like a limit to God's forgiveness. The Lord even says, "Stretch out your hand over the sea so that the water comes back and covers

the Egyptians, their chariots, and their cavalry.” Except, of course, God didn't part the Red Sea to kill anyone. God parted the Red Sea in order to liberate Israel, to give new life to those who feared death. It's pharaoh's rage and greed that drives him to oppose God's new life, that leads his army in opposition to a miracle. The Red Sea would not remain parted forever. The problem isn't that God didn't offer forgiveness. The problem here is that pharaoh didn't accept the consequences of God's forgiveness: liberation for Israel and a future without slaves in Egypt. If you're against God's new life, you're destined for death. That's not a lack of forgiveness in God. That's a consequence of decision in pharaoh and, all too often, in us.

I find Peter's question infuriating, if only because it's a question so close to our own hearts. “Alright Jesus. We've heard about how many times we're supposed to forgive. But how serious do you think God is about that stuff? How many times do I

have to forgive before I'm released from my obligation to forgive?  
What's the bare minimum we have to do?"

What a terrible question. What a revealing question. What a familiar question. We're a people that define our responsibilities by minimums, by limitations. God, however, defines responsibility by possibility, by hopefulness. God doesn't seek life support. God seeks abundant life. The number seven here is important. In Hebrew folklore, seven stood for completion, because God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh. To forgive seven times was, in Peter's mind, working at forgiveness as hard as God worked at creation. Peter likely pulled his suspenders out with his thumbs, proud of such a profoundly faithful suggestion.

And then Jesus takes Peter's answer and puts it into the warp drive, sending it in ludicrous speed to parts of Peter's universe that no one has gone before. Seventy seven times? And

in fact, some translators argue that the better translation here is seventy times seven. Exponential perfection. Forgiveness, in Jesus's view, is without end in the life of the church.

On Friday, I thought I'd take a few things to the recycling center and the dump here in Radford. As I arrived, I noticed the attendant taking a long look into one of the dumpsters. "Throw your stuff in one of the other two," he said. "Someone threw a kitten into this one." Soon I found myself assisting three city employees in getting this little feline friend out before they were crushed by someone's refuse. The small, scared cat tried to bite my gloved hand, but I would have done worse to any creature that looked like someone who tried to kill me in such a cruel and unusual way, so I understand. I dropped her and she took refuge somewhere far away from people, under one of the dumpsters awaiting our departure so she could find a place to feel safe. If it hadn't have been for the gentlemen who alerted me to the kitten's

presence, my garbage might have killed God's creature. If it hadn't been for their care, who knows what would have happened to that poor kitten. That experience taught me a number of things about forgiveness.

If someone you're trying to help bites you, consider how much you look like the someone(s) who hurt them so badly. It was easy to forgive this frightened creature, not only because I wasn't hurt, but because her fear was well founded. How could she immediately trust someone who looked so much like her oppressor?

More than that, it's really hard to hear Jesus's words in Matthew 18:22. Forgiving someone seventy times seven times - 490 times - is difficult. It's at least understandable when it's a kitten who has suffered. It's much harder when it's the one who's made the innocent to suffer. Even when someone's done something so despicable, they're not ineligible for God's

forgiveness or ours.

Remember that forgiveness doesn't justify the action. Nor does it make the relationship continue as though the sin never happened. Forgiveness means that we don't identify the sum of someone's identity by their worst mistake. It means we move forward rather than backward, pursuing transformation rather than punishment.

It also means that forgiveness isn't trite, nor is it simple. Forgiveness is an ultimate accountability, because it requires recognition of a particular sin. It requires precise acknowledgement of a wrong. Forgiveness isn't weakness. In fact, forgiveness requires a pliable strength and significant willpower. Strength to overcome the anger and hurt you face. Pliable to absorb the unknown futures brought on by forgiveness. Willpower to commit to not just a decision to forgive but the process of forgiving, all in full knowledge of the sin that you're

forgiving.

Importantly, we don't force forgiveness on victims. I hope there's a day that the cat we rescued can trust humans again, but I can't make that decision for her, nor should I. Forgiveness is something we pursue as a community but it's not something we can compel from our members, especially those who've been traumatized by the sin of abusers. Forgiveness is more than a simple decision. It is a process we undertake, an ideal we pursue. But it's not naive. Forgiveness knows the world can never be the same before the sin occurred. Instead, forgiveness hopes for a world, and people, from transformed by forgiveness.

Forgiveness won't always be received. That's one of the reasons, I imagine, that we look for the limits to our responsibility to forgive. It's hard enough to forgive someone who wants forgiveness. It's much harder to forgive someone who refuses that forgiveness, who won't even admit their wrong in the first place.

We know internally how much courage, how much conviction, how much risk, how much trust in God that it takes to forgive someone. If it's not acknowledged? That's a profound disappointment.

When talking about the Lord's Prayer, and in particular, the petition to *forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us*, Luther said the following: "Here is attached a necessary, yet consolatory addition: As we forgive. God has promised that we shall be sure that everything is forgiven and pardoned, yet in the manner that we also forgive our neighbor. For just as we daily sin much against God, and yet God forgives everything through grace, so we, too, must ever forgive our neighbor who does us injury, violence, and wrong, shows malice toward us, and the like." In other words, our experience of God's forgiveness is tied up with the forgiveness we offer to others. Our capacity to receive forgiveness is shaped by our capacity to offer forgiveness.

We're tempted, like Peter, to ask about the limits of our responsibility to forgive is because it is so serious, so divine, so difficult, so self sacrificial. God leads Israel on a journey of liberation that constantly requires forgiveness. And almost immediately after the Red Sea is parted, the people choose to worship a calf statue made of gold and ignore the living God who gave them life. They complain of hunger and God gives forgiveness in manna. They complain of thirst and God gives forgiveness in water from a rock. They doubt they'll ever reach the promised land and God's forgiveness looks like faithfulness as the Lord delivers them across the Jordan. This is not easy work, the kind of forgiveness that God brings to us. But God shows us a commitment to forgiveness long beyond 490 times.

So we, the people filled with God's spirit, the creatures shaped into God's image, find forgiveness a holy trial. It's greater than most anything we could ever accomplish on our own. It's

something that requires constant attention because people continue to fail. Forgiveness doesn't stop future sinning. But what we hope forgiveness does is inspire a desire to change. It catalyzes us to reckon with the wrong in the world and yet not let the wrong define the world in which we live. Forgiveness is a commitment to a world that pursues relationship rather than isolation, resurrection rather than death, redemption rather than rage. Forgiveness is the image of God in which we were created, and cruciform goal for which we reach.

On Thursday night at Radford University, two important things happened. The first was that I proved I could still stay up past midnight to support student programming. It surprised even me.

The second, and much more significant, was the Abraham Jam. A Jew, a Christian, and a Muslim who travel together sharing music inspired by our unique faiths that share one God

and one forbear in Abraham. They closed the concert with a cover of Steve Earle's "Jerusalem," a song about the hope that, "one fine day the children of Abraham will lay down their swords in Jerusalem." In that land that we call holy, people of each faith have been responsible for unholy violence, unholy prejudice, unholy anger. And yet, these fellas travel as a witness to forgiveness between them and their faiths. They sing as a witness of God's forgiveness that reaches to the Hebrews, and reaches to the Christians, and reaches to the Muslims. The song goes something like this:

"I woke up this mornin' and none of the news was good  
And death machines were rumblin' 'cross the ground where Jesus  
stood...

But I believe that one fine day all the children of Abraham  
Will lay down their swords forever in Jerusalem."

Forgiveness is the reckless belief that the holy land might be holy again, that we might truly embrace the liberating love that Jesus taught us, that the lion and the lamb might lie down with one another and share a kingdom cuddle. And it's a commitment - our commitment - to follow in the forgiving footsteps of Jesus.

What do these readings tell us about God? That there is no limit to God's forgiveness. What do these readings tell us about us? That we're a people shaped by God's forgiveness and called to forgive in the same manner. What do these readings encourage us to do in light of that knowledge? To pursue forgiveness beyond seven times, beyond seventy seven times, beyond 490 times, and into eternity. Amen.