Today’s readings from the final chapter of the book of Genesis, Psalm 103, and Jesus’ teaching in Matthew’s gospel all share a common, timeless theme which touches every human life. It is a theme at the very center of the beliefs and practices of both Jewish and Christian faith traditions. That central theme is **forgiveness**.

Peter asks Jesus, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” Jesus said, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.” By all accounts Peter thought he was being very generous in being willing to forgive seven times. The number seven represented perfection in Hebrew thought. But Jesus says in effect: Stop counting. Forgiveness is not about arithmetic and keeping a tally sheet of all the times wrongs have been committed against you. Forgiveness is not about an exchange or transaction. It is about tending relationships. Michael Marsh writes: “Forgiveness for Jesus is not a quantifiable event. It is a quality, a way of being, a way of living, a way of loving, a way of relating, a way of thinking and seeing.” (from his sermon “Infinite Forgiveness”, 9/11/2011).

So, now let’s do some “unpacking” of forgiveness. Let’s first clarify a few things which forgiveness is NOT.

1. **Forgiveness is not denial.** Forgiveness is not about dismissing, minimizing, or papering over an offensive act that has caused harm to another. “Forgiveness isn't acting as if things don't have to change, or assuming that because God is merciful, God isn’t grieved and angered by injustice.” (Debie Thomas, “Unpacking Forgiveness” in webzine Journey with Jesus, 9/6/2020). The Christian faith takes sin seriously, and acknowledges that sin often has enduring, and long-lasting consequences which cannot just be swept “under the rug” of memory.

2. **Forgiveness is not condoning or excusing bad and hurtful behavior.** We’ve heard and maybe even said ourselves, “Forgive and forget”. But you won’t find that phrase anywhere in Scripture. Some events and situations should not be forgotten: the Holocaust, slavery, ethnic cleansing, exploitation of children and women, mistreatment of Native peoples, the infidelity of a spouse, abuse, betrayal, or a lie that turns your life upside down.

3. **Forgiveness is not a detour or a shortcut.** Forgiveness takes time; it is a process. It takes time to fully disclose the nature and impact of an offense, so it provides no quick fix or simply applied band-aid. “As Lutheran theologian, German pastor, and anti-Nazi dissident Dietrich Bonhoeffer warned, we must never allow forgiveness to degenerate into "cheap grace." That is, "the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession… grace without the Cross.” (Debie Thomas, Unpacking Forgiveness).
4. **Forgiveness is not synonymous with healing or reconciliation.** Healing and reconciliation may be what we most deeply desire, but they do not necessarily always follow the act of forgiving. There is no undoing the consequences of hurtful behavior toward, or violation of another person. We can’t take back a wrong after it has occurred. Essayist Debie Thomas writes: “Healing has its own timetable, and sometimes reconciliation isn’t possible. Sometimes our lives depend on us severing ties with our offenders, even after we’ve forgiven them. In this sense, forgiveness is not an end; it’s a beginning. An orientation. A leaning into the future.” (“Unpacking Forgiveness”).

So, how do you and I respond when we have been wronged. **Do we seek revenge? Run away from life and relationships? Let ourselves be overcome by bitterness and paralyzed by darkness? All of us are capable of, and may have responded to wrongs we have suffered in these ways. But they are not life-giving responses. They leave us stuck in the past, tied to the unjust and harmful acts of another person. They leave us bereft of the future God wants to give us.** (Michael Marsh, Infinite Forgiveness).

Today’s Collect reminds us that because we cannot please God without God’s help, we need the Holy Spirit “in all things to direct and rule our hearts.” When we need to accept forgiveness, a good place to begin is to ask God for honesty and humility, to say “thank you”, and then to ask for God’s grace and strength to turn and make a fresh start. When we are the ones called upon to extend forgiveness, we may need to start simply by asking God for the desire to forgive. Forgiveness is an act of willing and grateful response to God’s infinite forgiveness shown towards us. It is a trusting act of releasing past hurt and pain in order to freely move into God’s future. Forgiveness does cost us, as we surrender our will to God. The gospel effect is found in believing that God always desires new beginnings, abundant life, hope, and healing for us and this world. Now, a final story of forgiveness told by Corrie Ten Boom.

“It was in a church in Munich that I saw him—a balding, heavyset man in a gray overcoat, a brown felt hat clutched between his hands. People were filing out of the basement room where I had just spoken, moving along the rows of wooden chairs to the door at the rear. It was 1947 and I had come from Holland to defeated Germany with the message that God forgives.

“It was the truth they needed most to hear in that bitter, bombed-out land, and I gave them my favorite mental picture. Maybe because the sea is never far from a Hollander’s mind, I liked to think that that’s where forgiven sins were thrown. ‘When we confess our sins,’ I said, ‘God casts them into the deepest ocean, gone forever.’
“The solemn faces stared back at me, not quite daring to believe. There were never questions after a talk in Germany in 1947. People stood up in silence, in silence collected their wraps, in silence left the room.

“And that’s when I saw him, working his way forward against the others. One moment I saw the overcoat and the brown hat; the next, a blue uniform and a visored cap with its skull and crossbones. It came back with a rush: the huge room with its harsh overhead lights; the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the center of the floor; the shame of walking naked past this man. I could see my sister’s frail form ahead of me, ribs sharp beneath the parchment skin. *Betsie, how thin you were!*

[Betsie and I had been arrested for concealing Jews in our home during the Nazi occupation of Holland; this man had been a guard at Ravensbruck concentration camp where we were sent.]

“Now he was in front of me, hand thrust out: ‘A fine message, Fräulein! How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!’

“Now he was in front of me, hand thrust out: ‘A fine message, Fräulein! How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!’

“And I, who had spoken so glibly of forgiveness, fumbled in my pocketbook rather than take that hand. He would not remember me, of course—how could he remember one prisoner among those thousands of women?

“But I remembered him and the leather crop swinging from his belt. I was face-to-face with one of my captors and my blood seemed to freeze.

‘You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk,’ he was saying, ‘I was a guard there.’ No, he did not remember me.

‘But since that time,’ he went on, ‘I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. Fräulein,’ again the hand came out—‘will you forgive me?’

“And I stood there—I whose sins had again and again to be forgiven—and could not forgive. Betsie had died in that place—could he erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking?

“It could not have been many seconds that he stood there—handheld out—but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do.

“For I had to do it—I knew that. The message that God forgives has a prior condition: that we forgive those who have injured us. . . .
“I knew it not only as a commandment of God, but as a daily experience. Since the end of the war I had had a home in Holland for victims of Nazi brutality. Those who were able to forgive their former enemies were able also to return to the outside world and rebuild their lives, no matter what the physical scars. Those who nursed their bitterness remained invalids. It was as simple and as horrible as that.

“And still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion—I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. ‘… Help!’ I prayed silently. ‘I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling.’

“And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes.

‘I forgive you, brother!’ I cried. ‘With all my heart!’

“For a long moment we grasped each other’s hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God’s love so intensely, as I did then”


Thanks be to God! AMEN.