

Title: How Many?

Text: Matthew 18:21-35

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Peter came to Jesus with a number - seven. Peter says, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?”

You have to give Peter some credit. Once is reasonable. Twice is generous. Three times and you are really trying to be a Christian. But seven? Seven is impressive.

You can almost see Peter counting on his fingers. *Surely seven is enough.*

And Jesus says, “Not seven times, but seventy-seven times.”

Peter is counting, and Jesus seems determined to mess up the arithmetic. But maybe we should be a little easier on Peter. Jesus has been making this difficult for a while.

Just a few verses earlier, Jesus told them about a shepherd with one hundred sheep. One wandered away, and ninety-nine remained. Ninety-nine out of a hundred. Most of us would call that a pretty good day. Yet, the shepherd doesn't. He notices that one is missing. So, the shepherd goes looking.

How far? How long? How many? Jesus doesn't say.

The shepherd just goes looking. Then Jesus talks about someone in the community who sins against you. Again, he tells us to go to them and talk to them. And if that person listens, Jesus says, you have regained that one. What an interesting and powerful word - regained.

There's the shepherd again. The point isn't winning. The point is regaining. We regain the one who matters.

Maybe Peter has finally heard enough. *Jesus, could we please get a number?* How long do we keep looking? How long do we keep trying? How many times do we forgive? Seven?

Jesus responds, “Not seven times, but seventy-seven times.”

Peter wants a number. Jesus gives him a story. A servant owes a king ten thousand talents. An impossible debt. The servant falls to his knees and says, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.”

The generous king knows and states, “No, you won't. You can't.” And the king knows it.

So, the king does something nobody expects, and he forgives it. All of it. The man walks out owing nothing. He is free and clear of the debt.

Then he finds another servant who owes him one hundred denarii. And immediately, he starts counting. He says, “Pay what you owe.”

The other man begs for patience, but there is no mercy in the forgiven servant. The one who owes him is thrown into prison. And we hear the story and know exactly who the villain is. *Him.*

How could somebody be forgiven so much, yet refuse to forgive so little? What kind of person does that? Jesus lets the question sit there, and maybe we should too.

Because forgiveness sounds wonderful until there is actually something to forgive. Then forgiveness gets a name, a face, a memory, or a wound.

On the morning of October 2, 2006, a gunman walked into a one-room Amish schoolhouse in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania. Before that terrible morning was over, five young girls would die. Five families would go home without their daughters. Five beds would be empty that night. Places at tables would remain vacant. Nothing could change that.

But before the day was over, something else happened. Members of that Amish community went to the home of the gunman's widow. Imagine the knock.

She walks toward the door, and immediately she knows who they are. The people whose children her husband murdered are there. Imagine the distance between where she is standing and that door. Five steps? Ten? From her perspective, it might as well have been 5000 miles.

Imagine what she expects when she opens it. Anger? Accusation? She knows why they are there, or she thinks she does.

Then she opens the door. And standing there is a family carrying a wound so fresh it barely has a name. Their daughter's bed is still there. Her clothes are still there. Her place at the table is still there. And they have come not to threaten her or condemn her. They have come to grieve with her. To tell her they know she has lost someone too.

Later, members of the Amish community would attend the gunman's funeral. When money poured in to help the families, some of it would go to his widow and children.

But stay at the door for a moment. Their daughter is still dead. The bed is still empty. The chair at the table is still vacant. Forgiveness changes none of that.

But that afternoon somebody knocked on a door. And maybe forgiveness is sometimes nothing more or nothing less than the bolt cutters that cut through the lock... just enough for grace to sneak into the room and sit down. That's forgiveness in the flesh.

A wounded person standing at the door of another wounded person. And suddenly Peter's question doesn't sound very theoretical.

How many? We know how many times we've been hurt. How many chances we've given. How many apologies never came. How much somebody owes us.

Peter knew his number. Seven. The servant knew his. One hundred denarii. And later in Matthew's Gospel, another disciple has a number. Judas' number was thirty pieces of silver. That's what Jesus is worth. Thirty.

Peter counts forgiveness. The servant counts his denarii. Judas counts his silver. We keep trying to calculate things grace refuses to calculate.

And then Matthew takes us to a table. Jesus has something in his hands too. Not coins. Not a ledger. In Jesus' hands is a loaf of Bread. Jesus takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it away. He says, "Take, eat; this is my body." Judas counts his silver. Jesus breaks the bread.

Then Jesus takes the cup and says, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” Peter asked, “How many?” Jesus says, “For many.”

Jesus doesn't give them a theory of forgiveness. He puts it in their hands – bread, cup – symbols of himself. And then he gets up from the table and lives it. Betrayed. Arrested. Mocked. Beaten. Stripped. Humiliated. Crucified.

The wounds are real. Grace does not erase what happened. Grace refuses to let what happened have the final word.

And then comes Easter. And something remarkable happens. Jesus goes looking for his own. His disciples are hiding behind locked doors. Afraid. The door is locked. But somehow, grace gets into the room anyway.

Jesus stands among them. And the risen Christ still has the scars. The wounds haven't been erased. But they are no longer bleeding. They no longer belong to Friday. The scars testify that the pain was real and reveal that the pain did not win.

And then there's Peter. Peter, who began all of this by asking, “*How many times do I have to forgive somebody else?*” Peter has done some counting of his own now.

Three times, Peter says, “I don't know him.” And after Easter? Peter goes fishing. Back where Jesus first found him. And Jesus goes looking. There's a charcoal fire on the beach. Fish and bread.

Of course there's bread. And the risen Jesus says, “Come and have breakfast.” He doesn't begin with an accusation. He feeds Peter. And then Jesus says, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” Three times. Not to humiliate him. Not to make him pay, but to REGAIN him.

And when Jesus has regained his one, listen to what he tells Peter: “Feed my sheep.” There it is again. The shepherd. The sheep. The one.

Peter began by asking how many times he had to forgive somebody else. And before the story is over, Peter becomes the one Jesus goes looking for.

That's gospel. The grieving Amish family walks toward a widow's door. The frightened disciples lock their door, and grace gets into the room anyway. Peter retreats to the sea, and Jesus is waiting on the shore. Different doors. Different wounds. Same grace. Grace keeps finding a way into the room.

There may be a door like that somewhere in our lives. A name may be on the other side. You know it. God knows it. Perhaps you aren't ready to walk through that door. Perhaps today you aren't even ready to knock.

Maybe the prayer today is simply, *God, I know the name. I know the wound. I know what they owe me. And I don't know how to stop counting.*

But I don't want this wound to decide who I become. Maybe that's enough for today. Because before forgiveness was something Jesus asked Peter to give, it was something Jesus gave Peter. Before Peter could feed the sheep, Peter had to discover that he was one of the lost, afraid, and ashamed, yet Jesus lets him know he is worth going after.

Peter counted to seven. The servant counted his denarii. Judas counted his silver. We count what others owe us. Jesus took bread. He broke it, and he gave it away.

After we betrayed him, denied him, abandoned him, Jesus came looking. He came through locked doors, on a beach, and around a charcoal fire. He came with scars on his hands and bread waiting for breakfast.

Peter wanted to know, “How many?” Jesus never gave him a number. He gave him a kingdom. A kingdom where the shepherd still goes looking. Where the one is still worth regaining. Where impossible debts are forgiven. Where wounded people knock on doors. Where grace slips into locked rooms. Where failures find breakfast waiting on the shore. Where bread is broken and given away. Where the scars remain, but they do not get the last word. Sometimes the bolt cutters of forgiveness cut through the lock... the door opens... and grace sneaks into the room and sits down.

How many? Grace... has lost count.