

My first thought when looking at these two scriptures was - forgiveness is straightforward. Jesus tells us to forgive - seventy-seven times in this translation; others have it translated as seventy times 7. In either case, Jesus' point is that his followers should forgive, and forgive over and over again-the same person for a series of the same transgressions. There are the hundreds of apologies and forgivenesses that happen (or used to happen before Covid-19) every week - not holding a door for someone loaded down with packages, not seeing someone and bumping into them, inadvertently going ahead in a line - these are asked for and granted without thought.

There are the other extreme of apologies needed and forgiveness hoped for. In the scripture today, Joseph forgives his brothers. These brothers who were jealous of the place Joseph held in his father's heart sold him to a passing group of egyptians as a slave. Joseph was young - a teenager. Today's piece of the story takes place many years later when Joseph has become quite a powerful man in Egypt. Up until now the brothers believe their father's presence has kept Joseph from locking them up or worse. But now Jacob, their father, is dead and they are in fear of their brother. They are amazed when Joseph embraces them and celebrates the presence of family back in his life.

What a gift that forgiveness is. Any court anywhere would say they had acted illegally and immorally. I can't imagine that they expected such an effusive welcome; such a level headed Joseph.

We know of their fear and their desire to be forgiven. What we don't know is how the brothers felt about what they had done. They certainly didn't want to be hurt or punished; but we don't know if they really want to fling themselves before Joseph and beg his forgiveness; did these brothers carry guilt and regret through the intervening years? Had they been tortured by their minds more than anything Joseph could have ordered up. Joseph doesn't really know their feelings either. It appears he doesn't care; it appears he has forgiven his brothers years ago.

But is that possible? Can we forgive someone who doesn't ask for it? Someone who doesn't accept their guilt? Someone who doesn't know they are being forgiven. Is forgiveness something between two people or can it be granted unearned and unknown.

I used to think I was forgiving - and I was/am about the bumping into someone on the sidewalk way. And, I have forgiven larger things, deeper things, things that have held a negative cloud over my life - forgiven them without being asked for it. The way I forgive someone who has deeply hurt me is to work out who they are and what their motivation was; understanding meanness coming from someone who is going through a hard time; tying a key event in a transgressor's life to their becoming paranoid and saying things about me to others. Once I walked a little while in their shoes - I saw the path that led to hurt - and having understood, I could forgive.

What I took for forgiveness was really the consequence of more information. Steven Covey who wrote the seven habits of highly effective people tells a story about his ride on the New York Subway after a long and frustrating day. A man got on with 4 young children who were jumping around and running back and forth in the subway car. Covey was fuming inside and

just about to chastise the father when that father turned to Covey and said "I'm really sorry about my kids behavior. We've been at the hospital all day. My wife just died and they don't know how to take it in. Neither do I, I guess." Covey's perception of this father immediately turned 180 degrees. It wasn't a commandment from Jesus that moved Covey to forgiveness, it was information. It was information that would allow almost anyone to forgive the children's wild behavior.

Believe it or not, I've had a few disagreements with parishioners over the years. I remember one exchange that was particularly hurtful to me and I suspected there was a personal situation going on behind this person's angry and hurtful exterior. We sat across from each other at a table and I expressed my pain and my desire to understand why they had attacked me so viciously. We sat there for about 20 minutes, my trying to pull confession out of them and their holding themselves at an emotional distance of miles. There was to be no forgiveness that day. Of course, I made my own assumptions about the driving force behind the anger and forgave from that correct or maybe incorrect stance. But that is not what Jesus is talking about.

He doesn't say, understand the one who upset you or injured you and then you will be able to forgive them. There is no mention whatsoever of understanding. I'm not saying that you shouldn't listen and try to understand. I'm saying that Jesus wants us to forgive. He wants us to forgive if we've been asked to or if we haven't been. So forgiveness does not require the participation of two entities. In fact, where the most forgiveness is needed there is often no channel of communication between the parties. We've had great examples of this in Ghandi, and Nelson Mandella; in the families who are mourning the loss of father or husband or son; of a mother or daughter or wife killed because of the color of their skin; When I was in chaplaincy training one of my classmates told us about her older brother who had been a policeman in Pittsburgh. A young father of 2, he was killed in the line of duty by a man who was trying to get away from him after a robbery. My friend's family had mourned deeply and then visited the convicted killer and offered their forgiveness. It helped this religious and faithful family; but it transformed the inmate who created circles of trust within the prison to enable people to come face to face with their crimes. There was the recent example of a brother of a man killed in his own apartment by an off duty policewoman and the forgiving and moving words he said in court directly to the defendant. They shared a hug and she began her prison sentence carrying a bit of the light of forgiveness.

We are in the valley of forgiveness now - there will be a lot for many of us to forgive; many relationships that need reconciliation come November 3, or 4 or 5. We are in uncharted waters, but one constant in our map is that Jesus mandates forgiveness. And we must obey - remembering that forgiveness does not have to be two sided. And remembering that forgiveness does NOT mean acquiescence. Forgiveness - especially as Christ defines it - forgiveness takes the sting out of the venom. We may never forgive or allow behavior that we forgive to thrive; but once we are fixated on another's transgression we have lost the clarity and freedom to act as we are called to.

We are in the deep valley of forgiveness now - there is much for which we need forgiveness. So much, that we don't even know how to phrase our sincere repentance. As many people of color came to our shores not speaking the language, not understanding why they were here,

not imagining what their future held 400 years later, the shoe is now on the other foot. We - the children of white privilege - don't even know how to ask for forgiveness - for our privilege, for our ancestors, for the giant leaps forward we have had. A fish does not see the water, a bird does not see the air - a Buddhist saying avers - and we who live in a world of white privilege cannot see the roads, the schools, the libraries, the food stores, the medical facilities, the internet, the police, the freedom of walking down a street - we cannot see these things as part of our privilege of being white. We think they are universal. It is when we see the folly of this that we begin to know that we need forgiveness - not for something you said or something I did but for our blindness to the sea, the air, the privilege that we swim in.

There is no doubt that we need forgiveness - whether it is from an individual person of color or from a whole people who we have finally, finally, finally, finally realized that we have exploited. And who we realize we cannot approach for forgiveness. We don't even know how to phrase the request. Forgiveness is a long way off - but a delightful thing to contemplate.

We will perhaps have to ask for forgiveness seventy seven times; maybe seventy times seven times. Now We

have to ask thinking it is a mystery and we don't have the magic word until one day we see the whiteness we swim in - everywhere. Until we see the roots of that privilege in 1619 and the fruits of it in 2020.

Forgiveness is not something we earn or deserve. Forgiveness must be something that we yearn for; that we realize we need; that we know is not our right but is our recognition of transgressions long denied and our hope that Jesus' words of extravagant forgiveness may extend to us, blind as we have been. And that when we can ask for forgiveness with no caveats or excuses, with only the laying bare of our sin, perhaps then we may reconcile on number seventy-six and rejoice in the possibilities that the one remaining forgiveness affords us. We are not there, but we are on our way. May it be so. Amen.