

How do we forgive the unforgiveable?

Last week we heard Jesus talking about working out differences between members of a community. And Fr. Christopher gave a great sermon on handling disagreements and forgiveness.

But. How do we forgive the unforgiveable?

This week, we hear Jesus tell Peter that you must forgive someone 77 times. Some translations turn that into 70 times 7. Either way, it's a ridiculously big number. Jesus is saying...forgive forever.

But how do we forgive the unforgiveable?

How do we forgive the person who has abused us?

How do we forgive a rapist?

How do we forgive the drunk driver who killed someone we loved?

How do we forgive a mass shooter who murdered innocent children?

How do we forgive the loved one who abandoned us?

How do we forgive a terrorist?

How do we forgive the unforgiveable?

Before we go any further, let me make it crystal clear that forgiving someone is never telling them that what they did was OK....that what happened was acceptable.

Merriam Webster defines the transitive verb, "forgive", as "to cease to feel resentment against an offender". My Google AI defines the word "forgive" as "to stop feeling anger against someone who has done something wrong."

When we forgive, it's an internal change in the way we view that person. When we forgive someone, we are not absolving them of responsibility, guilt, or blame that may be involved in their actions.

But the basic question remains. How do we forgive the unforgiveable?

Let's start with Jesus own words. How many times must we forgive? According to today's Gospel, 77 times. That is a stupid number.

But what if Jesus gives us that unattainable goal because we must keep trying. We have to try again and again and again until we are able to forgive.

Perhaps we can take Jesus' suggestion of forgiving 77 times as gentle encouragement. He knows we won't get it right the first time. We won't be able to forgive the second time....or the 15th...or the 52nd.

But we are called to keep trying to forgive until we are able to stop feeling anger against someone who has done something wrong....until we are able to stop feeling resentful of that person....until we are able to stop hating that person.

Until we are free of the hold that unforgiveable action has over us.

How do we forgive the unforgiveable?

In the movie "Moonstruck", the brother of Cher's fiancée tells her that he loves her. Cher slaps him across the face and says, "Snap out of it."

Have you ever been going through something difficult? And someone tells you to "Snap out of it?" to "Get over it?"

Although harsh, it's actually sound advice. For our own good, for our mental health and to move forward with our lives, we do need to "get over it." But we certainly can't "snap" out of it. Getting over something unforgivable will take a lot of time and a lot of work...a lot of prayer...maybe a lot of counseling.

I think that's what Peter is actually getting at in today's Gospel. "Jesus, what if I CAN'T forgive." Jesus responds, "Keep trying."

Today's gospel also gives us the parable of the unforgiving servant. Here's a quick breakdown. A King (that's God) forgives a servant (that's us) a huge debt because he has mercy on that servant. But that servant (again, us) won't forgive a much smaller debt of another servant. When God finds out, they're angry at us and reminds us of the debt they forgave us...our sins by dying on the cross.

The parable suggests we should forgive because we have been forgiven so much. But we are human. We will fail....and Jesus tells us to keep trying. But...how can we forgive the unforgiveable?

I'm not an expert. I'm not a theologian. I'm not a trained mental health professional. What do I know?

Well, I do know about the healing power of God through Jesus Christ. I know that the Holy Spirit is among us at all times to offer peace and comfort. And there are some solid steps we can take to forgive what is unforgiveable to us.

Forgiveness requires us to let go of the demand for revenge and to make the decision to let go of the bitterness that ties us to the person who hurt us.

Remember forgiveness does not erase the past nor require us to pretend the wrong did not happen.

Forgiveness does not require us to be best friends with the person who did us wrong. We must always maintain safe boundaries for our own well-being and learn from what happened to us.

And forgiveness does not make what happened to us OK or excuse the behavior that harmed us so greatly.

And...how can we forgive someone who isn't sorry? How can we forgive the person who doesn't apologize or feel remorse. How do we forgive someone who may not even be in our proximity or alive?

This is when we must remember that forgiveness is not something we bestow on someone else. Forgiveness can be offered, but forgiving something unforgivable is what we give ourselves to allow us to move forward.

And now for the most difficult part of today's sermon.

What if WE....what if I....what if you....are the person who needs forgiveness?

How do we forgive ourselves for something we feel is unforgiveable?

How do we let go of the guilt and shame of something we've done that we know has hurt others? Something that we regret and wish we could take back?

How do we forgive ourselves?

Jesus tells us. Keep trying. 77 times. 70 times 7 times. 490 times.

We are all beloved children of God. No matter what we've done...no matter how we've failed or who we have hurt. We are beloved children of God.

Forgiving ourselves takes all the same steps as forgiving someone else.

We must do our best to let go of the bitterness and resentment we feel toward ourselves for the wrong we've done.

Forgiving ourselves does not erase what we have done but will hopefully help us not to make the same mistakes again. We will learn, correct our behavior, and move forward doing better in the future. We will do our best to make amends.

And by forgiving ourselves, we have a better chance of forgiving others and we will be able to help others forgive.

God has forgiven us a huge debt. We are called to do our best to forgive ourselves a smaller debt.

This past week, Fr. Christopher, Mother Sylvia, and I went to Las Cruces for the annual diocesan clergy retreat. The first evening we were given the opportunity to ask our bishop, Michael Hunn, questions. Here was mine.

In one or two sentences, what advice do you have for the clergy of the church today? And what advice do you have for the parishioners in our churches?

Bishop Hunn did a pretty good job of keeping his answers concise, as I requested.

For the clergy: Keep your faith. Live your faith.
For the congregations: There is hope.

As Christians, we believe in the Good News of Jesus Christ. We believe in the love, acceptance, mercy, and forgiveness of God available to all of us. This is our faith. Remember it. Keep it. Live it.

There is hope through this faith. When the world seems unbearable, when forgiveness – of others and ourselves – seems impossible...return to God in prayer, in this community, in your heart and know that we are all beloved children of God.

And that is how we are able to move forward when we encounter the unforgiveable.