



**THE FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**  
**SEPTEMBER 13, 2020**  
**MATTHEW 18: 21-35**  
**“THE FLOW”**

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?”

Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

“Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

“At this the servant fell on his knees before him. ‘Be patient with me,’ he begged, ‘and I will pay back everything.’ The servant’s master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

“But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins. He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded.

“His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.’

“But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

“Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

“This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.



## SERMON

Each week I send the SoulSpirit band members “the flow.” I also send it to Paul Bell, who creates our slides and records the band.

The flow lists the order of songs and other elements of our worship service. In a perfect world, you, the participant, become caught up in “the flow” and then carried along with the theme and flight of our worship.

The opening song gives you a hint of the theme for the day. This morning “ain’t no stopping us now” points toward life’s obstacles that once held us back and points to breaking through these barriers.

The sermon song: “I’m still standing,” relates most closely to the sermon’s theme. And the final song usually ends with a bit of instrumental improvisation that allows Jason Mileto, our editor, to provide music to our ending slides....

This morning, in his unique teaching style, Jesus is addressing one manifestation of his divine flow and then what its malevolent opposite might look like.

but first, we need to clear up a misconception.

Jesus tells Peter to forgive the same person 77 times.

We may then conclude that to be Christian is to always forgive anything. Or to forgive the same hurt 77 times.

As if there is a heavenly chalkboard where we keep score of how forgiveness points. Wow, I only have twelve more years to live and I only have 64 forgiveness points.

This has led to:

- People being welcome mats for the worst kind of behavior from other people
- Women remaining in abusive relationships
- Women being sexually abused by the same person over and over
- People believing they need to put up with all kinds of bad behavior from others
- People being a punching bag for another person

In addition, this thinking can prevent good people from not learning any self-protective skills.

It’s tough out there. You gotta stay on your game.



In order to make sense of this teaching, we need to start with a solid spiritual foundation.

A wise woman, Glennon Doyle, writes: “if you are uncomfortable—in deep pain, angry, yearning, confused—you don’t have a problem, you have a life. Being human is not hard because you’re doing it wrong. It’s hard because you’re doing it right. You will never change the fact that being human is hard, so you must change your idea that it was ever supposed to be easy.”

So, if we’re working to develop a spiritual life, one of the challenges is that we must accept and bear the difficulties of our own life and also be willing to help those who are overwhelmed with the difficulty and pain of their lives.

This is why community and partnership are so important.

We are social animals. There is no me without thee. In spiritual reality, we are deeply connected to one another. We can either live with this truth in mind or we can ignore it to our detriment and to the detriment of people in our lives....

Our parable this morning is about the kingdom of heaven.

The kingdom of heaven is a way of living in the here-and-now according to the principles, values, lifestyle, and mindset of Jesus Christ.

In this regard, Paul reminds us, “let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.”

That says it, doesn’t it?

“let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.”

With this in mind, we want to be thinking contextually about this passage of scripture.

The first action is that Jesus answers Peter’s question about forgiveness.

How many times? Seventy-seven.

Logically, if a parable follows, the only conclusion to draw is that the parable is going to illustrate this statement. The parable will open up what looks to be an impossible proposition.

No one gets to stab us in the back 77 times or do they?



Let's find out.

In this parable, we have a man who is in deep debt to the king. Ten thousand bags of gold. That's a ridiculous sum of money. Jesus must be exaggerating the amount of the debt to show us that this man is in deep trouble. And the king isn't playing around. He's about to sell the man and his family and everything he has to recoup as much of the debt as he can.

At first glance, it seems like the king is tough. But then, we see his forgiving nature.

In response to the man's pleading for mercy, the king doesn't say, "okay, I'll give you a chance to work off the debt." He forgives the man's debt entirely. It is a totally creative and grace-filled act of forgiveness.

But this guy doesn't get it. He is brought into the divine flow through the act of the king. But he quickly goes from pleading for his life and from being forgiven to throwing a fellow servant in prison for an incredibly smaller debt he is owed.

Here is a man for whom forgiveness means nothing.

Hearing the news about this servant's action, the king is outraged and orders the man to be jailed and tortured until he can repay his debt.

Okay, but wait a minute. Didn't Jesus just tell us to forgive someone seventy-seven times?

And then we hear this parable where the king forgives once and only once. In fact, rather than forgiving even a second time, he dishes out a more severe punishment on the second go-round.

what's going on?

The spiritual psychologist, Fritz Kunkel, provides insight into the parable.

He writes, "forgiveness must be creative, and if it is, there is no need for repetition: if it is not, it is not forgiveness at all; it is indulgence."

The parable highlights what turns out to be Jesus' tongue-in-cheek response to Peter.

Yeah, Peter, go ahead. Forgive the same insult 77 times. Eventually the top of your head will blow up because the repetition of abuse has filled you with rage.

So let's pull this parable into our lives.



The first servant experiences an act of creative forgiveness from the king. Forgiveness that is meant to set him free, not just financially, but free to see the world in a different way. Free to see the king in all his benevolence. Free to live a transformed life.

Instead what he shows us is that if we don't transform our pain, we transmit it to other people.

The servant remains unchanged by the king's creative and grace-filled forgiveness.

Instead, he transmit the pain of his situation to his fellow servant.

And the king does not forgive even a second time. He will not indulge the man's behavior.

One strike and you're out.

So, there it is. What we think is forgiveness may not be forgiveness at all. If we keep giving people chance after chance after chance, we may find ourselves with the same people at our throat time after time.

If we know in our hearts that we have creatively forgiven someone and they cannot, will not, be transformed by the act of forgiveness, then we must let them go. Leave them to suffer the pain of their lives.

We might say "it is in the hands of the king."

Let go and let God. Or let go and remain in the flow.

Being in the flow of God's forgiving grace means we are living according to rules different than the world's rules.

And what is the purpose of the flow of the spiritual world?

You may have heard the story of the grandfather who told his grandson about the battle within each of us.

He said, "the battle is between two wolves inside us all. One is malevolent. It is anger, envy, jealousy, regret, jealousy, greed, arrogance, shame. Self-pity, guilt, recent and narcissism.

The other is grace-filled. It is joy, peace, love, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith.



He grandson thought for a moment and then asks, “which wolf wins?”

Grandfather answers, “the one you feed.”

Now we are going experience these negative thoughts and feelings, just like the first servant, but we don’t want to grab hold of them and keep feeding them. We want to have them rather than they having us.

And then we want to return to the divine flow.

Returning to the divine flow allows us to continue to move forward, allows us to win the spiritual battle, allows us to remain standing tall, and to remain fully alive.

**SERMON SONG**

I’m Still Standing (Elton John)