

Sermon for September 13, 2026 on Forgiveness by Penny Squirrel

Let us Pray: Father - we come before you at this time knowing that you are a merciful God and that you forgive us. We come aware too of how much we need your guidance and your grace. Bless, I pray, the words of my lips and the meditations of our hearts that they may be a blessing to us and pleasing to you, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen

"Peter came up to the Lord and asked 'How many times should I forgive someone who does something wrong to me. Is seven times enough?' Jesus answered: 'Not just seven times, but seventy times seven.'" "Current medical research indicates that persons who are unforgiving are more susceptible to a variety of illnesses than are their more tolerant counterparts. The New England Journal of Medicine reports that type A personalities (long thought to be particularly prone to cardiovascular illness) are NO MORE LIKELY than anyone else to suffer heart attack or stroke. The culprit, researchers say now, is anger. Type A persons are in danger only if they carry around unresolved hostility. It is anger, not activity, that places a person at risk. "Anger - not activity - Unresolved hostility - not personality type. Think on it and on the links that keep on being reported between faith and good health . "How many times", said Peter, "should I forgive someone who does something wrong to me? Is seven times enough?"

Have you ever wondered what in the world was going on in Peter's head that day? Jesus has been talking to his disciples about temptation and sin, about how it would be better to chop off a hand or poke out an eye that causes one to sin and go into life crippled or maimed than to go whole into the fires of hell. He tells them this and then he ends off his talk by speaking about how his followers should deal with fellow believers who have offended against them and then Peter comes up to him. Perhaps it was like the students in school or at university go up to a teacher after class and ask his burning question – how many times? Was there someone Peter had in mind? Someone who had sinned against him time and again, someone close to him who nevertheless kept driving him back or driving him away by the thoughtless or just plain mean things he or she did.

Perhaps someone like we ourselves know? Perhaps an alcoholic brother who keeps on getting things right - and asking forgiveness - and then getting drunk and getting things wrong all over again?? Perhaps a father or a mother or a spouse who keeps making us promises and then apologizes to us for not keeping them because their has been a new contract issued at work or unexpected guests have dropped by or I just had to do something else at the time I promised to you or I ran out of money or whatever?

Hey Jesus, I want to do the right thing but you've got to know it is really hard to take the same thing over and over again from the same person. Just how much do you expect me to put up with it?? Just how often should I forgive someone who persists in hurting me: - someone who persists in letting me down, is insulting to me, and is feeling sorry and asking my forgiveness only to do it all over again???? Everyone here wants to do the right thing and I bet that everyone here has felt like asking the same question Peter asked Jesus. Everyone must have wondered at some time after being totally frustrated with a colleague, lying brother or cheating spouse just how much you are expected to take - how often you should be required to give a person a second chance?

Interesting isn't it , just how much like Peter we all are? We have our limits especially when it comes to pain - especially when it comes to "setting ourselves up to get hurt - again and again - by the same person, BUT we want to do the right thing -- even if it costs us...And Peter he really does try just like we try.

"How many times", said Peter, "should I forgive someone who does something wrong to me? Is seven times enough? "Does anyone here know what the number of a person is?? - the number that is assigned by biblical tradition to us poor, wretched, imperfect mortals?? Six is the number of humankind. SEVEN is the number assigned to God by tradition - the number that is regarded as the emblem of perfection. How often should we forgive someone asks Peter - "is seven times enough? Seven is the divine number - seven is lots – its everything - it's certainly more than the human number -certainly more than what our human nature suggests to us. Is seven times enough??

William Willimon writes: "a human is not supposed to be good at forgiveness. Forgiveness is not some innate, natural human emotion. Vengeance, retribution, violence, these are natural human qualities. It is natural for the human animal to defend itself, to snarl and crouch into a defensive position when attacked, to howl when wronged, to bite back when bitten. Forgiveness is not natural. It is not a universal human virtue." So Peter really is trying to go the second mile - to be all that God wants - when he asks Jesus, if forgiving someone seven times is enough. Just as I think you here today really are trying -that you really do want to do the right thing - even as you ask -how often must I forgive Mary, or Ken, or my sister or colleague.

And Jesus answered him, saying "Not just seven times, but seventy times seven." Ohhhh!! Doesn't Jesus just get to you sometimes??? I mean isn't it a bit much - this answer - I mean how would a person keep track?? Let's see seventy times seven that's 490 times we must forgive someone. That's about impossible to keep track of isn't it? You'd have to have a notebook or something - a journal-just to manage it. And it would have to be pretty large - because there are a lot of people who hurt us over every day

Think of the image of a person packing around a ledger with them - a score card - a lap top computer with the newest and latest version of "Forgiveness Facts" on it - just so they could see when the divinely appointed limit to forgiveness has been reached and they can let go and be really angry and hateful. Pretty ridiculous isn't it -kind of like the golfer who is so wrapped up in her score that she forgets to enjoy her game or the fisherman who is so intent on catching the big one that misses the fun and relaxation of the sport. Yet people do it all the time.

Keeping score in matters of forgiveness is not only ridiculous, it is harmful. Harmful not just to person we are resentful and angry at - but harmful to ourselves. The fact is that in matters of forgiveness - the person who keeps score is almost always the biggest loser. "One of the most seriously depressed persons I ever met was someone who could not let go. He was trapped by grief over the loss of an older brother. The brother had been a bit of a scoundrel most of his life. He had insulted and hurt his younger brother many times in the way that family members sometimes do - and finally - some 20 years earlier than the time I met the younger brother - he had swindled him in a land deal. Apologies and offers of restoration had been rejected - and at last the older brother died. After the funeral reality set in on the remaining brother- the reality that he had forsaken family to nurse a grudge. He had been inflexible too long and it was too late. His remorse over this, his inner conflict, his self-directed anger, his regret, ate him up." I bet you all know someone like that -- perhaps to a lesser degree you are even like that - not bitter or angry or upset at another person, for what they have done but bitter or angry or upset at yourself for not having put it behind you while there was still time.

And Jesus answered Peter, saying "Not just seven times, but seventy times seven. "Indeed -- and how is this possible - especially since forgiveness does not come naturally to us.

We need to be anchored to the divine and have the divine power work through us - and that is part of the meaning of the story that Jesus tells Peter and us all when Jesus goes on to speak about the king who forgave his official a debt of millions of dollars only to discover later that the wretch would not forgive a debt of a hundred or so dollars. Jesus suggests with his story that if you keep a ledger - if you insist on what is due to you -- you will always end up in the Red. But he also suggests in the story that if you remember how much mercy God has shown you; if you allow the incredible wonder of his grace and his forgiveness to fill your mind and your heart if you recognize the incredible mercy God has poured out on you, then you will, in turn, be able to forgive others as often as need be - from your heart.

A woman who disliked a singularly obnoxious neighbour was put in a bad mood every morning when, standing at her sink fixing breakfast, she would see him driving off to work. Finally one morning she watched him drive away, and as the familiar feeling of resentment began to rise, she whispered to herself "He is a person Christ Jesus would love". That morsel of theological insight - applied to her neighbour - was the antidote to her resentment.

The point is that God doesn't keep track with us and neither should we with others. Keeping track is not GOSPEL and it is not good for us. The Gospel is that we can come to God over and over again that we can have a fresh start each day, that the past is put behind us and forgotten completely. And the gospel is that when we remember the mercy of god towards us it is easier to show the mercy of god towards others. Sometimes of course - distance - or death - can keep us from forgiving. And sometimes too forgiveness is not accepted, and old wrongs simply can't be made right - too much time has passed - too much is changed. But we can pray to God when it is too late - when things seem beyond us - we can pray to him and say "Lord, I can't forgive this. Take this hurt into your own hands and bring your gift of healing." A fresh start is possible. God gives us one when we ask him and he will help us to do the same thing for others.

If we were able to sit down and have a conversation with God, what do you think that he would tell us about humanity and forgiveness? As we listen to this little imagined talk with God, perhaps his words of wisdom may impact your life.

I dreamt I had an interview with God. "Come in," God said. "So, you would like to interview Me?" "If you have the time," I said. God smiled and said: "My time is eternity and is enough to do everything; what questions do you have in mind to ask me?" "What surprises you most about mankind?" "God answered:

- "That they get bored of being children, are in a rush to grow up, and then long to be children again.
- That they lose their health to make money and then lose their money to restore their health.
- That by thinking anxiously about the future, they forget the present, such that they live neither for the present nor the future.
- That they live as if they will never die, and they die as if they had never lived..." I then asked..."As a parent, what are some of life's lessons you want your children to learn?" "God replied with a smile:
- "To learn that they cannot make anyone love them. What they can do is to let themselves be loved.

- To learn that what is most valuable is not what they have in their lives, but who they have in their lives.
- To learn that it is not good to compare themselves to others. All will be judged individually on their own merits, not as a group on a comparison basis!
- To learn that a rich person is not the one who has the most, but is one who needs the least.
- To learn that it only takes a few seconds to open profound wounds in persons we love, and that it takes many years to heal them.
- To learn to forgive by practicing forgiveness.
- To learn that there are persons that love them dearly, but simply do not know how to express or show their feelings.
- To learn that money can buy everything but happiness.
- To learn that two people can look at the same thing and see it totally differently.
- To learn that a true friend is someone who knows everything about them...and likes them anyway.
- To learn that it is not always enough that they be forgiven by others, but that they have to forgive themselves." "The truth of God is that God is forgiving. The power of God is the power to help you to show that truth to others, through the love you give to everyone you meet. May it be so. AMEN