

Limitless

Jesus, I think, is the ultimate party pooper. Just when we think we have life figured out, just when we think we are nearing the horizon, he pulls back the curtain to show us that we aren't even close to mastering the truth. He does this today, and he did this with his disciples. Peter must have thought he was on to something. *"Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?"* Whether he was looking for the end point to forgiveness, a kind of bottom line ethical standard, or whether he really thought his offer of seven times was truly generous, Jesus burst his religious bubble immediately. *"Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."* Seventy-seven times. Seventy-seven times. That's obscene! Does Jesus really expect us to forgive people seventy-seven times? Of course not. He expects us to forgive even more generously, even more graciously, even more frivolously than just seventy-seven times. He expects forgiveness to become as near to us as our breath, and, truth be told, if we ceased breathing after the seventy-seventh time, well, there wouldn't be much of us left anymore. That's what makes Jesus so dangerous, if we truly give ourselves over to him. His ways are not our ways, and yet he expects his ways to *become* our ways.

In calling for forgiveness seventy-seven times over, he's not suggesting that the seventy-eighth time someone wrongs us, we can take vengeance into our own hands. He's painting a picture of a radical, in some ways non-sensical way of living in the world. Since the beginning, people have been taking vengeance into their own hands, achieving their desired end through violent means. Consider the archetypical story of Cain and Abel. After Cain's murder of Abel, the result of feeling slighted and rejected, the Lord commanded that anyone who harmed Cain

would be avenged sevenfold. His descendant, Lamech, took that curse even further, and proclaimed that anyone who harmed him, vengeance would be wrought upon them seventy-seven fold. See, the writer of the Gospel didn't just pull his numbers out of thin air. He's using an ancient story of violence and a curse to illustrate just how deep Jesus' reversal of that ingrained need for vengeance goes. Jesus' command to forgive seventy-seven times takes one of the most primal, vengeful stories in the Jewish tradition and subverts it...does something new, lays down a new law, a new way of being and relating to one another. I imagine Jesus, standing next to Peter, his eyes peering into the Great Mystery, his hands stretched as wide as he can reach them, a smile on his face as he says, *"Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."* Yes, his teaching is radical, and it's difficult. We are daily conditioned to be a people for whom forgiveness does not come easily. We expect, and hope, that what goes around comes around...that people get their due, get what's coming to them. But within the spiritual economy Jesus inaugurated with his life, death, and resurrection, vengeance has no place. Punishment does not belong to us. For we must first recognize that we ourselves are broken...that we have wronged people...that we have at times been cruel, hurtful, manipulative...that we behave in ways that do not build up our brothers and sisters. Yet even at our most depraved, even at our most hurtful, even at our most sinful moments, the love of God was still given to us, seen in the loving and forgiving face of Jesus Christ. We have been redeemed by the superabundant, frivolous love of God, and that comes with a cost. The cost, the sacrifice, of our need to take vengeance, or hold grudges, or withhold forgiveness to those who wrong us.

That's the thing about Jesus, he's not simply a good moral teacher worth occasionally listening to. Jesus is the one who reorients us when we wander, who guides us when we feel lost, who saves us time and time again when we fall into sinfulness. Jesus is the one whom we

look to when we are unsure how to live in the world. Jesus is the one against whom we should measure every decision of our lives. As St. Paul spoke so long ago, and as we heard this morning, *“We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord.”* As Christians, we live lives perpetually in response to the grace, love, mercy, and forgiveness of God in Christ. For those of us who have been washed in the waters of baptism, there is no going backward to a life lived before Jesus Christ. And there is no moving forward without him. So, rather than struggling against the kind of life he desires for us, just surrender to it. Let’s recommit ourselves to his way of life, as daunting and difficult as it may seem. Let’s peer into the Great Mystery along with him, and be overcome with gratitude for the salvation we have so graciously been given. And then, let’s go out into the world and be frivolous with grace and forgiveness as well. Because after all, only beauty and love will save the world.