

We're honoring our catechists, youth ministers and adult faith leaders this weekend, for teaching and forming our children, youth and us in our faith. One of their lesson methods is reinforcement, making a point by repeating it over and over in different ways, trying to make it stick.

Jesus also did this. Think about all the times and ways he taught the forgiveness lesson. There were the parables of The Prodigal Son, The Lost Sheep; he taught us The Our Father prayer, where forgiveness is central: "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us;" there was last week's Gospel on reconciliation; and many other examples.

And after all of this, it still didn't sink in to his apostles. Peter asks Jesus in today's Gospel: how many times must I forgive? Seven times? He wants to put a limit on it. Jesus must be exasperated. He probably thought: okay dude, you want numbers, I'll give you numbers. How about 70 times seven? And in case you're doing the math and still don't get it, here's another parable.

So Jesus talks about someone who owes a king "a huge amount." Earlier translations said 10,000 talents, which in today's money is six billion dollars. The king is incredibly compassionate, and forgives the debt. Then the same person who's just been forgiven runs into a co-worker who owes him about \$12,000 in today's money. He doesn't cut him any slack. He sends him to debtors' prison and ruins the man and his family. The king hears about it, and cancels the previous forgiveness he had extended.

Jesus ends his story by saying that just like the king, God will cancel his forgiveness, if we don't imitate how much he forgives us, if we don't act like he does.

We learn forgiveness at home, when quarrels start with brothers or sisters or visiting cousins; we learn forgiveness at school, when quarrels start with classmates, when we're playing sports. Then we grow up and we take those lessons less seriously. We get self-righteous, we have resentments, we hold grudges. Like Sirach said in our first reading: we hug them tight.

Maybe we don't forgive someone because that makes us feel we're better than they are, and we can tell everybody else about it. Today's Gospel made me aware that I do this, with the people on my short list. With God's grace, I'll start changing.

Or maybe we don't want to forgive out of pride: we don't forgive someone because we believe we're totally in the right, and that other person owes us an apology first. If we take that stand – that there won't be any fence-mending until an apology comes first – we may lose that relationship. Catholic psychologist Sidney Callahan puts it this way: "Do you want to be right, or do you want to be in relationship?" So if we're feuding with someone, let's ask ourselves that question. Do we want to be right, or do we want the relationship? What's more important to us?

When we don't forgive, it hardens our hearts. It's a rejection of Love, of God's way with us, because forgiveness and love are connected. Refusing to forgive is refusing to love, and that's never acceptable, because each one of us needs forgiveness! When we refuse to give it, we make it impossible to receive it – from others, and from God. Expect that people don't always do what's right. If we want God's extravagant mercy for ourselves, have mercy on others. Learn Jesus's lesson: if we don't forgive others, like God forgives us, God will cancel the forgiveness he's given us. We can't go to our graves with resentments and anger and revenge or we'll face purification, or worse.

Forgiveness is liberating. It shows our gratitude, that we appreciate God forgiving us, and so we pass on the liberation that we've received to someone else.

Forgiveness is the central message of the Gospel. Start living the lesson. Like Deacon Corey counseled us last week: take the first steps. We need forgiveness to maintain our relationship with God and with each other. Ask for God's grace, his help, and we can forgive. Just remember how many times God has forgiven us.

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