

SEPTEMBER 14, 2008
PENTECOST 18
“HOW MANY TIMES?!”

Let us pray: Forgiving God, you forgive us our sins freely and fully in order that we might forgive one another—and even ourselves. Keep the forgiveness flowing, O God, after Jesus’ example and in whose name I pray. Amen.

The headline of last Monday’s LA Times Health Section shouted “C’mon, get happy” right under a full color picture of a yellow happy face balloon accompanied by the words, “*The pursuit of happiness has always been a good idea. But now science, with research to back it up, can finally show us how to get there.*” Well, if you bother to read the article—or at least skim it as I did—you’ll quickly find out it’s pretty dubious “science” that’s being touted here, citing a bunch of authors of self-help books featuring up-beat titles like “What Happy

Women Know,” “Happiness: Unlocking the Miseries of Psychological Wealth,” “The How of Happiness: A Scientific Approach to Getting the Life You Want,” “Happiness is an Inside Job” and of course, “Happiness for Dummies” and “The Complete Idiot’s Guide to the Psychology of Happiness.” In order to protect the guilty I won’t cite any authors. It reminds me of one of my favorite, all-time NYer cartoons that I pulled out of my cartoon file the other day—you know the one where the guy is pictured standing with a noose around his neck, precariously perched atop a high pile of books whose spines face toward us the reader, and so we know they’re self-help books, with titles like “Positive Thought,” “Affirmation Therapy,” “More Joy,” “Every Day, Every Which Way,” “Centering,” “A New Beginning” and others including “Free to Be.” The poor guy’s evidently, of course, about to commit suicide with the help of his pile of self-help books.

Accompanying Monday's Times article, was one of those handy little grayish-colored boxes that accompany any good feature story and that summarizes the article's practical implications. This little gray box included a nice biblical number of 12 suggestions on "How to Stay Sunny." They offer awfully good advice, of course, and as you'll see, distill quite a bit of what goes on in church here. Let me tick them off quickly for you. Don't bother to write them down—you already know them all.

Count your blessings by which they mean "express **gratitude**," —a pretty good start, don't you think?

Cultivate optimism

Avoid over-thinking and social comparison

*Practice **kindness***—not a bad idea.

*Nurture **relationships***

Do more activities that truly engage you.

Replay and savor life's joys.

Commit to your goals—now it begins to sound a bit like a Dilbert comic strip as with the next one,

Develop coping strategies.

But then comes number nine—the reason I’ve taken all your time with this:

Forgive—although it’s a pretty thin kind of forgiveness they’re recommending that consists of the advice to keep a journal or write a letter in which you “let go” of anger and resentment toward those who have hurt you—the next thing to a sugar pill, I’d say, ignoring the hard work of real—rather than “literary” or “fictional” forgiveness.—the hard work of actually confronting the other person face to face. And the next two, interestingly, are:

Practice spirituality and take care of your body.

There you have it, 12 tips as to “how to stay sunny”—or, I guess, how to “get sunny” if you weren’t “sunny” in the first place.

Notice that it's Peter, the leader of the disciples, a pretty "glass is half-full" kind of guy who usually tended to look on the bright side, who initiates today's encounter with Jesus. Remember how it was Peter who didn't want to hear anything about any suffering or cross lying ahead for Jesus in our Gospel just a couple of weeks ago and how last week we heard along with the rest of the disciples being instructed about how to treat someone who's "sinned against another" — remember, first confront them privately with what they've done. If that doesn't work bring along another person or two, and if that still doesn't work then "tell it to the church," Jesus says, and if that doesn't work then let that person be to you as a tax collector or sinner — which as Mark Allen Powell, whom I quoted last week, has suggested probably doesn't mean "kick him out," but remembering Jesus' penchant for hanging around with just such people — sinners and tax collectors — it's

probably Jesus' ironic way of saying "keep working on them" or "don't give up on them."

Well, today Peter, maybe sensing that Jesus is signaling that forgiveness is at least as important as discipline, comes up to Jesus seeking further clarification and asks:

*"Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, **how often** should I forgive?"*

And probably having a pretty good sense of the direction Jesus would point him he adds, *"As many as seven times?"* Peter always the practically-minded disciple (and future pope) wants a rule—wants to get the code of canon law down in black and white. And, of course, Jesus won't play Peter's silly numbers game in this matter of forgiveness but instead replies *"Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times"*—or even *"seventy-times-seven"* as older translations put it—in other words—"more than you care to count, Peter," Jesus is saying.

Forgiveness has no bounds—no limits!

Which, of course, for Jesus is excuse enough for telling a story—a peculiar, even infuriating story, to be sure—about a slave who once owed his master the King an incredibly large amount of money—10,000 talents, which those who bother to figure such things out has estimated to be about **\$2 billion** in contemporary cash. Scholars say that 10,000 was the largest number in use in those days and the talent was the largest unit of wealth—and so we’re to understand this with a smile on our faces as an exorbitant, extraordinary sum that isn’t of course to be taken seriously but throws into hyperbolic contrast what immediately follows in the story. For this slave, freshly forgiven this absolutely incredible debt by his master, turns around and grabs by the throat his fellow slave who owes him, by comparison, a paltry sum of a hundred denarii. There’s absolutely no comparison, in other words, between what the king has forgiven his slave and what the slave has refused to forgive his

fellow slave. It's laughable, this slave's inability to "get it" — that as Jesus' taught his disciples to pray to his Abba God "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."

Only, of course, it's not really funny at all but all too true as we let Jesus' story sink into our own consciousness and consciences — as we remember those times we have failed to be forgiving of those who've sinned against us even as we remember all--everything we've ever done or left undone — that God in Christ has forgiven us. For us too the comparison is laughable — were it not so grotesquely true.

What's more, Jesus' little story ends on a sharp and edgy note that we can be forgiven for finding a little hard to respond to with our usual "The Gospel of the Lord," "Thanks be to God." For it certainly doesn't sound like very good news to hear the King summon the slave when he'd heard about his unforgiving behavior, "*You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because*

you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?" And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured—get that? **tortured**—until he would pay his entire debt." Fat chance of his coming up with \$2 billion dollars, huh? Another grotesque exaggeration.

And then that p.s. designed to send a shiver up and down the spines of the likes of you and me: "*So my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.*"

"C'mon, get happy," indeed! "Get ready for the judgment day," isn't that how the old song goes? There's no "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" self-help in Jesus' story is there? Well, is there?

No, there isn't. We can't "forgive" our way into God's acceptance—we simply don't have it "in us." But, of course, and thank God, God does. Just as Jesus ended last week's reading on that ironic note of

telling his followers to treat the unrepentant as “sinners and tax collectors” so he leaves us—as recipients of his never-ending grace and forgiveness. God’s interest isn’t in punishing us for being unforgiving—for demanding the impossible from us and holding us accountable for the \$2 billion debt of our sin. God’s interest, as Jesus himself put, is in “saving sinners” and not the righteous—which is precisely what God has done in Christ on the cross, cancelling the debt of our sin, entirely, once and for all—and now by the sheer grace of divine forgiveness, moving us to forgive others not in order to save our skins but because God has already done that in Jesus Christ.

I know it doesn’t seem possible. We’re so terribly well aware of how “the good we so much want to do we find it so hard to do” while the evil we want to avoid seems to easy to do—as we heard from Paul earlier this summer in a passage our Council studied together last Tuesday night. And

that's why we've been given stories like that of Joseph in our Old Testament reading for today. Here in the very last chapter of Genesis the long saga of Joseph and his brothers reaches its climactic conclusion following his magnanimous and memorable act of forgiveness extended to his jealous and devious brothers who years before had sold him into slavery and deceived their father, Jacob, into believing that he had been killed by a wild animal, bringing Jacob the bloodied coat of many colors he had given his favorite son as evidence.

Well, to set up today's climactic scene it's important to know that now that old patriarch Jacob has died, his sons fear that Joseph will renege on his act of forgiveness—they don't fully trust him, you see—and so try to deceive Joseph one last time into thinking that his father, Jacob, had urged Joseph from his deathbed to spare his wayward sons—which Joseph had already promised and fully intended to do. You see,

Joseph's brothers projected their perfidy—their bad faith—onto him, expecting only the worst from their brother who had risen to become the Pharaoh's right hand man.

So once again the scene is enacted with his brothers treacherously begging Joseph to forgive them, subserviently falling down before him in tears weeping aloud “*we are here as your slaves.*” So one last time—or who really knows if it was the last time—Joseph reassures his brothers that his forgiveness is heartfelt and the last word, but in his reply makes a startling theological assertion toward which the whole Book of Genesis, the Book of Beginnings, has been building for fifty chapters.

Joseph says to his brothers, in words that are spoken “over their heads” to all of us, words that we are meant to take to heart as the Gospel truth: “*Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God?*” (a pointed reminder of Adam and Eve's sin in the garden, I always

think). *Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, (what the old RSV translated as “As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good”) in order to preserve a numerous people, as God is doing today. So **have no fear**; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.’ In this way,”* our reading concludes, *“he (Joseph) reassured them, speaking kindly to them.”*

Here in these next-to-closing verses of Genesis I think we find revealed the good news that our very ability to forgive one another as we have been forgiven is the gift of our Creator God’s utter creativity, God who as Joseph saw and said, is able to use even our evil-doing—as well as the greatest evil-doing of the greatest evil-doers in history—as the raw material out of which to create good . We don’t know how or why God chooses to work in this way, only thank God, God does—making even the likes of us naturally unforgiving and unforgivable types

able to forgive and thereby become God's co-creators of good in a world always threatening to devour itself with revenge and resentment because of our failure to forgive.

As Paul put it to his Roman fellow believers: *“Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.”*

And that indeed is the best good news possible—that our supremely creative God, able even to turn our evil into good, is our forgiving—and forgiveness creating—Judge.

The peace that passes understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.