

## Service for Sunday 13 September, Revd Pauline Crispin

Be assured that as these printed services have gone out each week, you have been held in prayer.

Teach us, O God, how to treat you,  
**how to know you, how to love you,  
how to learn of you,  
how to do as you would have us do.**

Teach us, above all,  
**how to show those same things to those around us,  
and those whose lives meet ours,  
those who rub alongside us each day,  
and those who flit briefly by. Amen.**

**Forgiving God,  
more willing to forgive than often we are to confess,  
help us to see our failings,  
to see where we fall short,  
to see where we deceive ourselves,  
where we close our eyes and ears  
to the ripples of our wrongdoing.  
May we breathe in the reality of our actions,  
the need to change, the depth of our unworthiness.  
We come before you, seeking forgiveness. (keep silence for a few moments)  
Now let us breathe in the power of your forgiveness,  
and breathe out the sin and pain in our lives  
in the tenderness of your forgiveness of us,  
that we may forgive as you have forgiven us.  
In Christ's name, Amen.**

Sing or Read:

- 1 God forgave my sin in Jesus' name ;  
I've been born again in Jesus' name,  
and in Jesus' name I come to you  
to share his love as he told me to.  
*He said :*  
*'Freely, freely you have received,  
freely, freely give ;  
go in my name and because you believe,  
others will know that I live.'*
- 2 All power is given in Jesus' name  
in earth and heaven in Jesus' name ;  
and in Jesus' name I come to you  
to share his power as he told me to.  
*Refrain*

Carol Owens (b. 1931)

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**Matthew 18:21-35** 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[b] 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, cancelled 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 cancelled 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."

### **Reflection on the reading**

In Matthew 16:13-19, Peter amazingly announces that he believes Jesus to be the Messiah. In reply, Jesus calls Peter the rock and promises to build the church upon his leadership. It is useful to remember that incident in which Peter is identified as a leader when looking at our lesson for this Sunday. In this reading, Peter comes to Jesus looking for clarity on what seems a simple question. "How many times should a person forgive a brother or sister?"

By this time in Matthew's telling of the story, Peter seems to be catching on a little about Jesus. He knows that Jesus is a Messiah who doesn't think or act like other people, so he tries to show Jesus that he (Peter) is learning. If Peter would have approached the question in the usual way, he would have said, "Shall I forgive as many as two or three times?" This would have been the approach that the rabbis would have taught; to forgive, yes, but cautiously. To forgive once would have been viewed as generous. To be let down by the same person and forgive a second time would be commendable. To be fool enough to get hurt by the same individual a third time and to forgive even then; this would be bordering on the superhuman. Peter knows that Jesus thinks big and that Jesus is superhuman. Therefore, Peter makes a bold move, Peter believes that he will get 'brownie points for stating; "Forgive as many as seven times?" This would be absurd by rabbinic standards, but it might just be the number Jesus would like. It's a holy number, and it has the kind of exaggerated quality that Jesus likes (go the second mile, give your cloak as well, etc.). Surely, we imagine Peter thinking, Jesus will like this answer. Surely this shows strength of leadership, holy insight, generosity of spirit. Surely, this is an impressive demonstration of all that Peter has been taught by Jesus.

Jesus however, surprises Peter by answering, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." Nice try, Peter. You are moving in the right direction, but even with a number like 490 you still have a long way to go. Nevertheless, it is an impossible number. Completely ridiculous. Jesus uses an absurd exaggeration. What it means is this: forgive your brothers and sisters beyond your ability to keep track. If you are keeping track, it is not really forgiveness at all. You may seem to be kind, but keeping track simply means that you are waiting for your 'neighbour', brother or sister, to cross some line, generously drawn perhaps--but a line nonetheless. Beyond the line you are no longer willing to forgive. Jesus calls into question the entire process. If you keep count, it is not called forgiveness.

What it doesn't mean either is that we should let people walk all over us 490 times. It means that long before we get anywhere near to 490, we need to rethink our relationship with that person.

Jesus tells this parable to reinforce the message. Note again the amazing exaggeration. The servant owes ten thousand talents to the king. Calculating this number is virtually impossible. One quickly finds that Jesus is using a number that has no realistic present day comparable. It would be something like billions of pounds. No king would lend an immeasurably large amount like that to a servant. That, however, is what this king is willing to loan and to forgive. When the servant then fails to forgive another for a remarkably small debt, his forgiveness is withdrawn, and the king has him thrown into jail. Again, exaggeration seems to be the way Jesus makes his point here. He is using exaggerated language to teach Peter and to teach us about the true nature of forgiveness.

There is a great irony in this. Peter heard the exaggeration in Jesus' answers, but, he could not know that ultimately, this was the size of debt Jesus would soon forgive. All the sins of all believers in all the world through all of time. An unbelievably and extraordinarily large debt. This is the way to conceive of the debt of ten thousand talents owed the king. There is no way that Peter, the one who tried to stop Jesus from facing toward sure crucifixion in Jerusalem ("God forbid it Lord," Matthew 16:22), could predict that this was the debt Jesus was to pay on the cross. The King of creation would pay with his life, so that the infinite debt would be wiped clean. Peter eventually came to see this and preached this message to the church founded upon his leadership.

The lesson for us today is still the same. Forgive without calculation. Of course, this is not easy to do. Each failure to do so is another talent piled onto the sin-bearing cross. The life of discipleship is a balance: we do not sin against the king to pile up our debt simply because we know it will be forgiven; we love and offer forgiveness even when we feel unable because the forgiving king loves through us. Failing to do so is to challenge the king to reverse his grace and substitute the judgment we deserve.

**Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your Name,  
your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread.  
Forgive us our sins  
as we forgive those who sin against us.  
Save us from the time of trial  
and deliver us from evil.**

**For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,  
now and for ever. Amen.**

Sing or read:

- 1 Make me a channel of your peace.  
Where there is hatred, let me bring your love ;  
where there is injury, your pardon, Lord ;  
and where there's doubt, true faith in you :  
*O Master, grant that I may never seek  
so much to be consoled as to console ;  
to be understood as to understand ;  
to be loved, as to love with all my soul.*
  
- 2 Make me a channel of your peace.  
Where there's despair in life, let me bring hope ;  
where there is darkness, only light ;  
and where there's sadness, ever joy :  
*Refrain*
  
- 3 Make me a channel of your peace.  
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,  
in giving unto all that we receive,  
and in dying that we're born to eternal life.

Sebastian Temple (1928–1997)  
from the *Prayer of St Francis*

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The Blessing of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, be with you, with those you love and with those you ought to love this day and forever more. Amen

