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September 13, 2020

Grace to you all and peace from God our Creator. And, from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who in great and gracious love for each of us and for the total forgiveness of all our sins, died on the cross and miraculously rose again into heaven where He works side by side with the Father to ensure the coming of His kingdom and our presence with Him there someday for eternity.

Grace to you and peace from Christ's Holy Spirit: who is our Counsellor, our Advocate and our Best Friend.

And, because we cannot manage it without Jesus, as we learned last week, His Spirit in each of us helps us every day to love God and love our neighbor-our neighbor who just might be a stranger, or even our enemy! Our neighbor whom we are called and commanded to care for just as much as we love ourselves, God's precious children.

Today, our vision of Christ's love is even more expanded as our Scriptures reveal how God's Holy Spirit in each of us teaches us how to forgive others, over and over again and over again as He forgives us in love.

This true, loving forgiveness, as God forgives, which Jesus amazingly somehow offered from the cross to those who betrayed Him, crying out, "*Father, forgive them, they know not what they do...*" -for us, sinful humans this forgiveness of God's, we learn today is a constant process, an active attitude and not, at all, a once or twice and done singular event in time.

That's right: today's Bible readings clearly show we're not to forgive just 3 times, as the ancient Jews stated in their law. We do not forgive 7 times as the disciple Peter hopefully suggests to Jesus today, doubling his Sunday School synagogue learned amount plus one for good measure in our Gospel Reading.

No, -listen:

we are to forgive-we are to release to God those who have hurt and harmed us from our hearts, Christ Jesus proclaims today, 70 times 7 times. 70 times 7- which, literally yes, equals 490 potential forgiveness events, but this gigantic tally is actually just a symbol Christ uses as an example today. You see, with Jesus' often typical hyperbole, 70 times 7 indicates for Him ...for God...INFINITY times! More than countable.

Yes, as His people, as Christ-ians, we are to forgive and forgive and forgive for FOREVER... over and over and over-endlessly- as much as possible because that's how God forgives us. FOREVER.

But it is not at all easy, is it?

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So, do you remember the most recent time, or any time that you offered someone forgiveness or they offered it to you?

For example, when you had wronged that person and you recognized that and apologized, sincerely, and then he or she replied, with care and love,

“I forgive you.” “I forgive you”.

Those are extremely powerful, freeing words, aren't they: “I forgive you.”

Such a heavy burden is truly, sometimes tearfully lifted from our hearts when we are so sorry and regretful for a hurt we've caused another and we confess that to that person and they then reassure us: “I forgive you...” “I forgive you...”

Maybe those words have run through our heads afterward, over and over and over like a blessing, “I forgive you. I forgive you.”

Perhaps we've even wept when we've offered forgiveness, letting go of the wrong done to us, hanging on us like a boulder on our belt with “I forgive you...I forgive you.”

In our First Reading today from the first book of the Bible, called Genesis, we hear these emotional cries from both sides—from the forgiv-en and the forgiv-er- uttered in this near ending of a very famous forgiveness story.

It's about Joseph, son of the patriarch, Jacob, offering with tears his forgiveness to his 11 brothers because decades before in a fit of jealousy, they beat him up and sold him as a slave from their home in Israel to far away Egypt—their own brother! They then, shockingly, terribly, covered up their crime by informing their father that his beloved son had died in an accident—was gone forever.

But, Joseph survived that enslavement; eventually, through God's grace and Joseph's faith in the Lord and his own brave wit, he became a valuable administrator to the King of the whole country—the Pharaoh's # 2 person, as sung in the popular 20th century musical our family really enjoys about Joseph—loved seeing it downtown years ago.

But, there was always, still, for Joseph, this dreadful estrangement from his whole family—this unresolved sinful act his brothers inflicted on him.

Until, sadly, after their father died and at his command, his brothers came to Joseph in Egypt, falling before him, Scripture says today, pleading and weeping loudly with him, as we read in verse 17, to “*forgive the crime of your brothers...*”

And, Joseph did forgive his brothers, somehow—through God whom he proclaimed worked good through him there in Egypt. “I forgive you...” “I forgive you...” he told them.

Today, the Bible reveals, however, it wasn't easy for Joseph to show his brothers this grace—when he first recognized them, he previously “*harshly*”, we read in Genesis, set his siblings up as thieves to be tried, enslaved and possibly killed, cause he was so furious with them. They had ruined his life as he knew it then... Several chapters in Genesis cover Joseph's revengeful testing of his brothers' hearts...

So,, perhaps you recognize –maybe you even relate with Joseph’s wrath at what was done to him-so violently betrayed by his own family members... Maybe you, also understand his reluctance to forgive them for what they did so unjustly and hatefully to him.

Perhaps you even feel a similar desire for vengeance- for revenge...

I understand that. You were hurt badly and that was not right.

You know, I once felt such rage and inability to forgive a fellow human being for a long time. You see, many years ago, long before I was married, or became a pastor, I was sexually assaulted at my own school, pinned down in an empty administrator’s office by a fellow class mate and someone whom I had dated.

That attack was horrific enough, but when I attempted to report this violent episode to one of our female school officials and perhaps get support and/or guidance, she just scoffed at my words. She said that person did not seem capable of such an act, because his mother was such a well known friend of the school, and he, this young man, was such a nice guy from a good family. He reminded her, this administrator smilingly asserted as she escorted me from her presence, of her very own husband. Yikes. So, that was not helpful in the process of what I knew had to be forgiveness from my heart for this person as a fellow child of Jesus...

As I continued to struggle for months in the complicated aftermath of that situation, I finally confided in one of my pastors from home-a woman-a wise, dear, faith-filled true minister. I am so glad God led me to her, through another pastor friend. First of all, she believed me, which was affirming and second of all, she mentored me through a personal study of forgiveness in the Bible, which was so helpful and healing to hear- of other believers’ suffering and shame and redemption in God’s eyes.

But, I was very angry and sad...

So, together, we read Joseph’s powerful story from today, which helped me deal with past family trauma also affecting me. She had me memorize and repeat often, especially when I was trying to sleep, which would not come easily for years, the second half of Colossians 3:13, specifically the command to, and I quote St. Paul’s words here, *“Forgive as the Lord forgave you. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.”*

She affirmed that if I kept saying it, over and over, over and over ,70 times 7, God’s Holy Spirit would one day help me do it...seventy times seven. That Jesus would help me forever live out this forgiveness I could not give on my own...“Forgive as the Lord forgave you. Forgive as the Lord forgave you”.

And together, we would recite also the Lord’s own Prayer-how He taught-how He commanded the disciples and us to address His Holy Father, especially the petition for mercy: *“And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us...” as we forgive...as we forgive..*

This repetitive, peace bringing prayer practice powerfully forced me to recognize and confess my own sins, realizing that we all have -I and he-that young man long ago- and you

and all of us have fallen from God's grace; as St. Paul writes in Romans today Chapter 14:10 - "*we will all stand before the judgement seat of God*"; that's why Jesus came to us from heaven to rescue us in the first place- we all-the world needs His love and forgiveness every day. Finally, I'll always remember my pastor reflecting more than once, with her strong hand on my shoulder as I wept in pain and grief and rage, "Sue Ellen, we must forgive those who harm us and ask Jesus to heal us." I liked that. "We forgive those who harm us and ask Jesus to heal us."

And, heal us, God does. Tenderly, compassionately Jesus tends our wounds. Truly, miraculously, beautifully, "*blessedly*", as our Psalm 103 sings today, our Creator "*for-gives all our sins; He heals all our diseases...He vindicates all who oppressed and He redeems our life -save us from the grave!*"

Friend, do you need to heal today? Do you need to forgive someone?

Or ask for forgiveness from a fellow child of God?

Believe this: I promise you, when you request His help in honest prayer, when you knock on His door, Christ will definitely answer and guide you through this process-this journey of mercy-

Let me share with you a kind of prayer of approach to God I've used...you may pray with me if you want: Dear Lord, I want to forgive more freely. I pray for your help to release my need for vengeance and to trust you to right all the wrongs. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.

Now, I need to tell you that my forgiveness through God and in God's eyes for that person did not come all at once that day or another day or one day, suddenly. Forgiveness for what he did to me-- was an evolving struggle, a very rocky journey which at times continues still to this day- but it has eased so much through prayer and contemplation of God's word, therapy. The beautiful love of my husband, and children, parents, sisters, brother in laws and friends certainly have helped restore my faith in humanity.

And, one day, twenty years almost to the day of that attack, I received a letter at home with no return address, but which contained a plea for my forgiveness from my abuser. He needed help and healing in his life with the Lord, he said.

Well, only through God's Holy Spirit I could give that to him.

And, as I've been reminded through the years, forgiving what happened does not mean at all forgetting what happened, but rather, having faith God will heal what happened. Thankfully, truly my faith in God was never shattered by that awful experience. Ever.

I believed then as I confess and believe with all my heart now that Jesus loves me and continues to walk this life with me, guiding me, leading me, and forgiving me and you and the whole world.

As Christ forgave us all on the cross, with His help, through His Holy Spirit, 70 times 7, I believe we all can forgive our trespassers, also.

God commands it, compassionately, in love. My friend, through Christ, you, too can say, "I forgive you". "I forgive you". Thanks be to God for this Good News. Amen.