

“The Giving Tree”

1Genesis 4:23-24, Matthew 18:21-35 (*NJB*)

It was Brother Bear’s birthday! Brother Bear was on top of the world. He was tickled pink. He was grinning from ear to ear. Many friends in party hats were there. There was a great big cake with nine candles on top. Brother Bear made a wish and it was time to open his presents. Wow - a model plane, some books, a video game! But when Papa Bear came out of the back room pushing a brand new bright red bicycle, Brother Bear was over the moon! This was his best birthday ever!

But Cousin Fred just could not resist! When Brother Bear’s back was turned, Cousin Fred jumped on that bike and took it for a spin. You can imagine, Brother Bear went berserk! He went running after Cousin Fred, yelling in his loudest voice, “**get off my bike, right now!**” And Cousin Fred did, after running into the mailbox, bending the front wheel into a mangled mess. Cousin Fred meant no harm but he just knew that Brother Bear would never forgive him.

We don't really know what was on Peter's mind in today's Gospel reading, when he asks "how often must I forgive my brother if he wrongs me? As often as seven times?" But we know something had happened to make him ask that question. And let's give Peter a little credit for asking "seven" times. After all, "seven" is the perfect number. There are seven days in a week. When God finished his creation, he rested on the seventh day. When Joshua "fit the Battle of Jericho," his army marched around the city seven times. In Hebrew, the word "seven" means completeness or fullness. And we moderns know about the "Seven Wonders of the World," the "seven dwarfs," seven colors in the rainbow, seven swans a-swimming, and the most popular number in Vegas!

So, give Peter some credit! He chose the right number. That's a lot of perfect forgiveness! You might even say it is prime forgiveness, especially since you mathematicians know that seven is a prime number. But as Gomer Pyle used to exclaim, SURPRISE, SURPRISE! Because Jesus was not too impressed with Peter's answer. Here was Jesus' reply," Not **seven** I tell you but seventy-seven times." Can't you see Peter's face falling? Can't you even see Peter's fellow

disciples snickering behind his back? I would guess that Peter's brother Andrew chuckled the loudest - "forgive me seventy-seven times brother!"

Jesus' answer is certainly not the way of the world we live in. And it wasn't the way in the ancient world either. The way of the world is more about revenge, retaliation, retribution, reprisal! That seems to make more sense! Why forgive someone seventy-seven times, so they can walk over you, abuse you, "wreck your brand new bright red bicycle!" Like old Lamech said to his wives in the book of Genesis, using the same number that Jesus used: "Wives of Lamech, listen to what I say. I killed a man for wounding me, a boy for striking me. Sevenfold vengeance for Cain but seventy-sevenfold for Lamech." Wouldn't Jesus' way be tolerating bad behavior? Wouldn't old Lamech's way be the smarter way, "eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth?" Wouldn't Jesus' way make you a doormat?

Then, on top of this "seventy-seven" answer, Jesus goes on to tell this crazy, over-the-top parable. And I mean, OVER-THE-TOP! In plain English, a man owes billions of dollars and does not pay it back. We are not told how he was able to borrow so much money but we

are told he has no means of paying it back. Billions! This is Elon Musk territory! And guess what, his master forgives the man's debt. All billions of it! His master must have believed something about how we prayed together this morning, "forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors."

And then the story gets even more unbelievable. In responding to Peter's question about how often he should forgive, instead we hear about **unforgiveness**. This same man who was forgiven billions of dollars will not forgive a fellow servant who owed him 200.00. The story says, "he seized him by his throat and began to throttle him, saying 'pay what you owe me!'" And then he threw him into prison until he should pay the debt. What??????? Could a man really be this hard-hearted? Could a person be so unforgiving after being forgiven so much?

Well, Jesus told the story and he seemed to know an awful lot about human nature and sin and forgiveness or the lack thereof. I am reminded of the story of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's father. This is a hard true story about **unforgiveness**. We know her best for her words to her future husband, Robert Browning: "How do I love thee? Let

me count the ways?” Well, her father forbid her to marry this man, although she was forty years old, probably old enough to make her own mind up, huh? So, she eloped, went to live in Italy with her husband Robert and they both became world famous. Among her admirers were Harriet Beecher Stowe, Alfred Lord Tennyson and William Makepeace Thackeray. But her father never spoke to her again. Elizabeth wrote weekly letters to her father in hope they might be reconciled, that he might forgive her for his perceived wrong she did to him. This went on for ten years! Then one day, after a decade of silence, a box came in the mail from her father. Her excitement quickly turned to anguish when she opened the box and found it contained all her letters - **unopened**. Edward Barrett’s heart had been so hardened towards his famous daughter that he didn’t open a single one of the hundreds of letters she wrote him.

Well, I guess Jesus knew what he was talking about in the parable. He ends the story to Peter by having the unforgiving man suffer great punishment. And Jesus said to Peter and to us, “And that is how my heavenly Father will deal with you unless you each forgive your brother from your heart.” The trouble is we human beings have this

great power of memory. And we cannot change what we remember. It would be fine if no one ever wronged us in the past. It would be fine if our pasts were all hunky-dory. But life doesn't work that way. But if we hang on to hurts with **unforgiveness**, we miss so much good and even joy in life. Our hearts become hardened. We suffer because of our **unforgiveness**. What can we do about this?

Here's an idea for you! Jane and Mike Berenstain called it THE FORGIVING TREE. Back to where we started with Brother Bear: Brother Bear's anger was very deep that Cousin Fred caused him when he took his brand new birthday bike and wrecked it. But the family of Bears had an old tree in the backyard that Mama and Papa Bear named THE FORGIVING TREE. As Papa Bear said to Mama Bear, "You know, that old tree in the backyard has seen a lot of forgiving over the years. I guess you would call it a forgiving tree." He said this after Brother Bear had climbed up into his tree house in that very tree, pouted, fumed, but then let go of his anger. He forgave Cousin Fred for wrecking his brand new bike. He came down out of that tree with a new attitude.

You know, we could do that. We could do it at home. We could do it here in church. We could make a forgiving tree. Oh, it doesn't have to be a literal tree. It could be in our imagination. Wasn't it Albert Einstein who said, "Imagination is more important than knowledge?" Every time we forgave someone or were forgiven by someone, we could hang a little "FORGIVING LEAF" on the tree. Seven times? Seventy-seven times? When I was a young man, I would be just like Peter. Give me that number seven. Of course then, I was a baseball fanatic, a New York Yankee fan, and my greatest hero wore number 7 - Mickey Mantle. I was like the Peanuts character, Charlie Brown, who remembered his school locker combination by memorizing baseball jersey numbers: "Babe Ruth was number 3, Willie Mays was number 24 and Mickey Mantle was number 7." So, seven times for forgiveness! Isn't that enough? I mean, Let's not go overboard. No, it's not enough! Not for Jesus! Not for the Berenstain Bears' family! Not for us!

No - seven times seventy! Actually, limitless! Keep on forgiving! Keep on hanging those "forgiveness leaves" on THE FORGIVING TREE. After all, we do say it together every Sunday morning in the

Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our debts and we forgive our debtors."

And what did Jesus say, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." And they divided up his clothes by casting lots, even as he hung on a tree for you and me. This cross was the ultimate "forgiving tree!" We are forgiven through Jesus, the greatest forgiver of all. **Let us pray:** "Lord, teach us so much more about this forgiving business. We need so much help from you to do it. And sometimes it really hurts. Thank you for forgiving us, as weak and needy as we are." AMEN.