

Peter asked, “Lord, how many times should we forgive?”

That is our lectionary text for this morning. That means that this is the passage of scripture that I am supposed to preach from this morning. Churches all over the world are talking about forgiveness this morning. But a few months ago I realized that this passage falls on the 10th anniversary of 9-11. How do you talk about forgiveness on 9-11? What does forgiveness even mean on 9-11? After ten years are we ready to talk about forgiveness on 9-11?

Allow me to begin by saying that there are times when forgiveness is easy. For example, when Abraham Lincoln was a lawyer in Springfield, Illinois, one day a man walked into his office and announced that he wanted to sue his neighbor for \$3. Lincoln tried to talk him out of it. Lincoln said, “Do you realize that I am going to charge you \$3 in legal fees to do this?” The man said, “I don’t care. It is the principle of the thing that matters. He owes me and I want him to pay!” Abraham Lincoln said, “Alright.” So, the man paid Lincoln the \$3 legal fee. Lincoln gave the \$3 to the defendant. The defendant paid the \$3 to the plaintiff. And they all settled out of court. Wouldn’t it have been easier to forgive and forget?

As Christians we all know that we should forgive. We know that harboring ill-will and resentment and bitterness is not good for anyone. Jesus taught us to pray saying, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” As Christians, this is what we do. It is part of the daily rhythm of our lives. We forgive. But Peter asked, “How many times should we forgive?” There are times when forgiveness is easy. But there are also times when forgiveness is not easy.

How do you forgive someone who does not want to be forgiven? How do you forgive when the other person has no intention of changing their behavior? How do you forgive when others have no desire for reconciliation? Dr. Gerald Mann said something that I return to time and again. Dr. Mann said, “I can not control what others say or think or do, but I can control how I respond. Bitterness is not something I want in my heart.” I agree. But the question I struggle with on 9-11 is how do you forgive when the pain is deep?

I think of Jimmy Dean. Some people know Jimmy Dean for his sausage (Jimmy Dean makes good sausage). Some people know him as a country singer. When I think of Jimmy Dean I think of the story that he told Guidepost magazine.

“I grew up on the wrong side of the tracks” he said in the interview. “We were poor, but we got by.” Until the day his father left them. “I was too young to understand it all,” said Dean, “but I remember the look on my mother’s face... as she hugged us and told us that our daddy had left us.” Those were tough years. His mother worked two jobs. The children took care of each other. When he was older, Jimmy Dean took his guitar to the

bar rooms and played for tips. He joined a country band. They started rising in the charts. The big breakthrough came when Jimmy Dean had a song that went straight to the top. It's one of my favorites: "Big John, Big Bad John." He became famous. Everyone was buying his records. Life was going his way.

Then one night the telephone rang and the voice said: "Jimmy, this is your daddy." He froze. He didn't know what to say. The voice said: "Jimmy, you have really made something of yourself... I am proud of you, son." Jimmy Dean had never heard those words before. Then his father said, "Jimmy, you know I wouldn't ask if I didn't need it, but I have fallen on tough times and I was wondering if you could lend me some money." Jimmy Dean said, "It was like someone had stabbed me. All I could think about were the years that we had struggled and the look my mother's face." He did not answer the question. He slammed down the phone and walked away. Peter asked, "How many times should we forgive?" There are times when forgiving even once can seem impossible.

Family Therapist Molly Layton in her article entitled "Apology Not Accepted" said that "When the pain is deep, the road to forgiveness can be long."

C.S. Lewis, in a letter to a colleague, wrote: "Last night in my prayers I realized that I had forgiven someone after 30 years of praying that I might." If it took a great Christian like C.S. Lewis 30 years to forgive someone, then we should not be surprised if forgiveness takes time.

Doris Donnelly, in her book *Learning to Forgive*, said: "Telling someone, 'You should try to forgive' is like putting your arm around their shoulder before the shrapnel has been taken out... Forgiveness is a process that is integrally woven with healing."

Greg Jones, who has written more books on forgiveness than anyone I know, recently spoke to an interfaith gathering. He lectured for an hour on forgiveness, and then afterward, during the question and answer period, someone asked: "Dr Jones, did you preach on forgiveness on the Sunday after 9-11?" Greg Jones said, "No." I didn't either.

Everyone remembers where they were on 9-11, but do you remember the Sunday after 9-11? I do. The church I was serving was packed to overflowing. In the middle of the worship service, a visitor stood up, pointed his finger at me, and asked, "Where was God and why did God let this happen?" I said, "Thank you. We are all wrestling with that this morning. I could give you the theological answer, that God gives us free will. God wants us to be peace makers. God wants us to follow the way that Jesus has shown us. God wants us to love him and to love one another, but forced love is no love at all. He gives us free will. Let's face it, any one of us could walk out of this sanctuary this morning and do something wrong, or terrible, or tragic. And I believe that God's heart is the first to break. But if you ask where was God? I saw God in the firefighters and rescue workers, and today we remember them. I heard God at work in the phone messages from flight 93. I felt God in the countless prayer vigils across our country that night, and I know that God here this morning. Billy Graham said, "The buildings fell but

the foundation didn't. God is our foundation." That is what we talked about, but I think Greg Jones had a better answer.

Did you preach about forgiveness on the Sunday after 9-11? Greg Jones said, "No." The bible tells us that there is a time to lament. There is a time to weep. There is a time to weep with those who weep. No, we didn't talk about forgiveness on the Sunday after 9-11, but he did say that there is a time to give our pain to God. And they concluded the service by singing, "There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole."

Do you believe that? Do you believe that God can heal our hearts and give us the grace to forgive others? 9-11 is our national tragedy, but I believe that we can learn from other nations. I am amazed at the people of South Africa. In the aftermath of Apartheid, they refused to let their tragedy define their nation. Rather, they have worked tirelessly for forgiveness and reconciliation. Today the people of Rwanda, in the aftermath of their genocide, are working toward forgiveness and reconciliation. Do we believe that God can heal hearts and give us the grace to forgive others? Corrie tenBoom did. She said: "There is no pain so deep that God's love can not reach it." Do you know her story?

Corrie tenBoom was a Christian woman who lived in Holland during the rise of Nazi Germany. A secrete compartment in her bedroom above her family's watchmaker shop became a hiding place for those who were being persecuted. It is estimated that Corrie tenBoom saved over 800 Jews from the Holocaust. When the Nazi's discovered what she was doing, she and her family were sent to the concentration camps. She was the only one in her family to survive and that was because of a clerical error. Somehow her name ended up on a list of people to be released. After the war she traveled throughout Europe talking about her faith and forgiveness. Then one day a man in the crowd stepped up and said, "Your message was wonderful, especially the part about how God can forgive us and cleanse us." Corrie turned and froze. She recognized him. He was the most brutal of the soldiers in her concentration camp. He reached out his hand: "will you forgive me?" She couldn't speak. She prayed: "Lord, I can't do this." And as she was praying she felt the Spirit take over. Her hand started to rise and she placed her hand in his and said: "Yes, yes, I forgive you." She lived to be 91 years old. In 1975 a book and a movie was made about her life called "The hiding place." That moment of forgiveness became the defining point of her life. She said, "God gives us the grace to forgive."

In our passage of scripture, Peter asked, "Lord how many times should we forgive? Once is hard enough, but what if someone sins against us twice? At the time of our text the rabbis taught that we should forgive 3 times. That was the ancient equivalent of three strikes and you're out. Peter was actually generous when he suggested 7 times. But Jesus said, not 7 - but 70 x7. That's 490 times. I believe that Jesus was telling us that forgiveness is not about numbers. It is about a heart that has been transformed by grace.

How does the story end? Jimmy Dean became a successful country singer. He is now in the Country music hall of fame. He was smart. He diversified. He got into the sausage business. I love Jimmy Dean sausage. He ended up with good friends and a wonderful family and a strong Christian faith. He told Guidepost magazine that God had

blessed him with everything he could want out of life. Then one day the telephone rang. The voice said: "Jimmy, don't hang up the phone. This is your daddy. I don't want any money. I don't want anything, except... Jimmy, the doctors tell me that I'm dying... I've made a mess of my life and I'm sorry. I was wondering if you could find it in your heart to forgive me." After all the years he said it was like a hidden door in his soul that was opening and all kinds of emotions were flooding in. The Lord took over and before he knew it Jimmy Dean was saying "Yes Daddy. I forgive you." He told Guidepost magazine, "I never want to carry a burden like that again. For the rest of my life I want to forgive."

Can we talk about this on 9-11? I can't control what others say or think or do. I can't control what the world does, but I do have some say so over what I allow in my heart. I don't want to dwell on bitterness or anger or hatred. We can pray for our enemies, we can ask God to heal our hearts, and we can ask God to give us the grace to forgive. And when it happens – it may be this morning, it may be a year from now, it may be 30 years from now, but when that God moment happens and you realize that you have been forgiven and that you can forgive others, then you're not going to want to forgive once, or seven times, or seventy times seven. You will want to forgive forever.