

**Sermon: Seventy times Seven Matthew 18:21-35 September 13, 2020**  
**Rev Steve Clifton Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa ON**



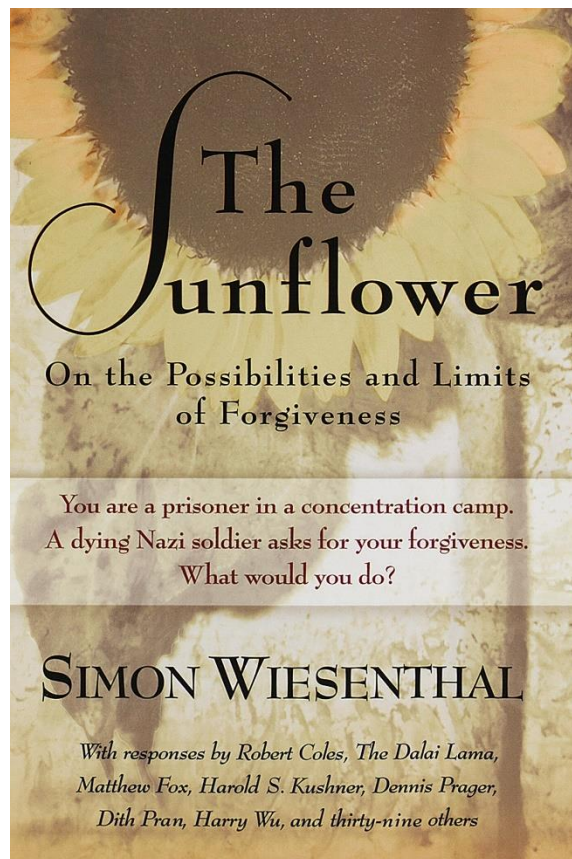
*Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times? Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy times seven.”*

His name was Simon. He was a Jewish prisoner of a Nazi prison camp. One day some guards came and packed him in the back of a truck and drove him to the hospital in a nearby town. They walked him to a ward room that contained a single patient, a man wrapped in bandages from head to toe. He was introduced to the bandaged man, a young officer from the Waffen SS who had been burned badly when his tank exploded; he was near death.

Simon was asked to sit at the bedside of the German and listened for hours as the wounded man told him a horrific tale- of how he had taken part in the massacre of Jewish settlements on the Eastern front – setting fire to the homes of Jewish villagers and watching the inhabitants burn, young and old, men and women, machine gunning anyone who tried to flee from the flames.

At the end of his horrifying tale, the German officer asked Simon to come closer and he whispered a plea for forgiveness. He asked Simon to forgive him for the terrible things he had done to other Jews...

After a time Simon got up and left the room in silence, leaving the German soldier unabsolved. Simon, raised in the Jewish tradition with its teachings on the importance of forgiveness, could not bring himself to forgive the horrific crimes this man had confessed to him.



In his book, *the Sunflower* Simon Wiesenthal tells this story of how he, a prisoner in a concentration camp, living in the midst of the Holocaust, was asked for forgiveness by a Nazi soldier. Years later he wonders about the moral correctness of his response. He could not bring himself to forgive the dying Nazi. And he asks a variety of faith leaders from many traditions to reflect on his experience and to answer the question: Was it wrong that he did not...that he could not forgive...?

Sometimes forgiveness is very hard. Sometimes the wounds are too deep. Sometimes the wrongs are too great. Sometimes the harm done is ongoing. It can be hard to forgive.

It's been years since I read *the Sunflower* but one of the responses to Simon's question about forgiveness has stayed with me because of its wisdom. It comes from a Jewish rabbi and in rabbinic style he tells a story of his own...

*A great rabbi from the city of Krakow was travelling home by train. As was his custom when he travelled, he dressed in rough clothes; to avoid people making a fuss over him he looked pretty shabby and poor as he sat in the train berth.*

*A couple of young men entered his berth and seeing a poor old man travelling alone they decided to entertain themselves. They roughed up the rabbi and hurled insults at him.*

*When the train arrived in Krakow a delegation from the city's synagogue were there to greet their rabbi at the station. The young thugs were mortified. Had they known their travelling companion was a great rabbi they would have treated him better. They approached the rabbi and asked for forgiveness. No the rabbi said. I cannot forgive you.*

*The next day the young men sent a friend to the rabbi. On their behalf he asked for the rabbi's forgiveness. "If they had known you were the Rabbi of Krakow they would never have been so harsh to you." The rabbi, again, could not forgive.*

*The next day the men themselves begged for the rabbi to receive them. In person, they asked him again for forgiveness. "Rabbi, we did not recognize you. Forgive us! "*

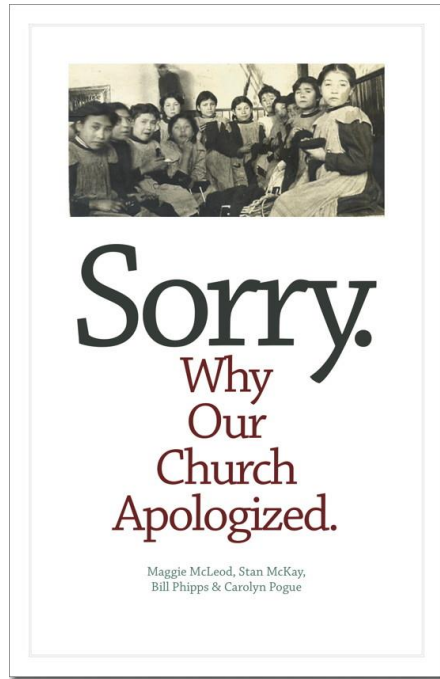
*"No I cannot forgive you "he replied.*

*"Why not? "They asked. "We are truly sorry for what we did to you. "*

*The rabbi answered. "You roughed up a poor man on a train and when you realized he was a rabbi you asked for the rabbi's forgiveness. The rabbi cannot forgive you. Perhaps if you ask the poor old man that you harmed for forgiveness he may forgive you."*

Forgiveness is a tricky business. Sometimes forgiveness is very hard. Sometimes the wounds are too deep. Sometimes the wrongs are too great. Sometimes we are not the ones who can forgive. Sometime forgiveness requires deeper understanding.

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When the United Church first considered apologizing to our Indigenous people for the colonial wrongs we did to them, the wisdom of the indigenous elders was that we should wait. Before we ask to be forgiven they suggested we spend time reflecting on what we sought forgiveness for, And then if we were to ask forgiveness, knowing, really knowing the harm we had done, the forgiveness offered would have greater meaning.

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Forgiveness is hard.

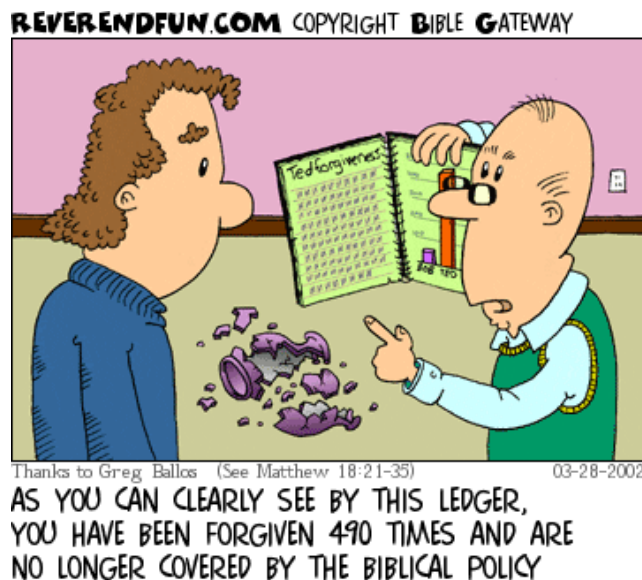
The rabbis in Jesus day taught that if a person harmed you repeatedly then you had to forgive them the first 3 times. The 4<sup>th</sup> time they did you harm, you did not have to forgive.





The Jewish and Christian traditions greatly value forgiveness. The rabbis taught that we should forgive three times because they believed that God forgave three times. In the opening verses of the Book of the Prophet Amos, a series of nations are condemned “for 3 transgressions and for 4.” This was understood to mean that God forgave the first 3 transgressions but punished after the 4<sup>th</sup> wrong. Since a human being could not be more forgiving than God, the rabbis concluded that people had to forgive three times.

In the gospel we read today when Peter asks his rabbi: “How many times do I forgive? As many as seven times?” he must have thought, in doubling the demands of the rabbis of the day and in adding one for good measure, that he was close to what Jesus would demand. Jesus stunned his disciples by saying: “I do not say forgive 7 times but 70 x 7”.



If we took Jesus literally with his demand is to forgive 490 times, we could keep a record and wait for offense 491, getting buried in paperwork... but of course in saying we need to forgive 70x7 Jesus is asking us to stop counting and to forgive without limit. And Jesus asks us to do this because he knows that God does not forgive us only 3 times; God forgives without keeping track and without limit.... And Jesus tells a parable that reflects the forgiveness of God; like the King in the parable God is ever willing forgive no matter how great the debt.

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A friend was approaching the end of his life. And part of his getting ready for that great transition was the work of forgiveness. He shared that past hurts and injustices can accumulate inside of us. We can carry unconsciously or deliberately, a list of the wrongs that have been done to us. We can carry a grudge, nurse anger or self-pity. And in doing this we weigh ourselves down as we carry that heaviness and hurt around. So my friend worked on forgiveness. He wanted to let go of past burdens. To lighten the emotional and spiritual load he carried before moving on...

Forgiveness can be hard. But might *not forgiving* can be even harder? Forgiveness may set us free, lighten our load and heal our spirits.



While we may struggle with the work of forgiveness and its complexities, God does not...

The rabbis of old asked that we forgive 3 times, because they understood that divine forgiveness was offered three times. God was gracious so God forgives.

And Jesus calls us to forgive, 70x7 times. For Jesus, God was infinitely Gracious so God forgives, God infinitely forgives.

And when that divine forgiveness meets us it may set us free, it may give the grace to forgive and heal...

Jan Richardson, author of the Painted Prayer Book writes these words of wisdom:

If we cannot/ lay aside the wound,/then let us say/it will not always/bind us.

Let us say the damage will not eternally determine our path.

Let us say the line of our life will not always travel along the places where we are torn.

Let us say that forgiveness can take some practice, can take some patience,  
can take a long and struggling time.

Let us say that to offer the hardest blessing, we will need the deepest grace;  
that to forgive the sharpest pain, we will need the fiercest love;

that to release the ancient ache, we will need new strength for every day.

Let us say the wound will not be our final home—

that through it runs a road,

on which we will finally see forgiveness,

so long practiced, coming toward us, shining with the joy

so well deserved.

Thanks be to God. Amen.