

Rom. 14:1 Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. ² Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. ³ Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. ⁴ Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

Rom. 14:5 Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. ⁶ Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God.

Rom. 14:7 We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. ⁸ If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. ⁹ For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

Rom. 14:10 Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. ¹¹ For it is written,

“As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me,
and every tongue shall give praise to God.”

¹² So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

Matt. 18:21 Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” ²² Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

Matt. 18:23 “For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴ When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; ²⁵ and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. ²⁶ So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’ ²⁹ Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ ³⁰ But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. ³¹ When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. ³² Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ ³⁴ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. ³⁵ So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

Conventional wisdom and Divine wisdom

What a week it's been here in Marin and Sonoma Counties, here in northern California and into Oregon and Washington! We've had fires and thick smoke in our state and up and down the entire west coast. It seems like a disaster of Biblical proportion, year after year, going on like the ten plagues or the seven lean years in Egypt; and we thought that those were just some old stories and hardly real! Yet what we are living through this year, and this August and September, is a grim reality, it's in the air we breathe and we're choking on it. How can we move through this difficult season and beyond this fire, smoke, covid-19; how can we find a hopeful future, or hope for a better future that is real and good?

Our gospel lesson tells us something of what is real for Jesus and his disciples, tells us what's going on in the community around Jesus during his lifetime and at the time of the early church. And the issue that's real and that is also the question behind chapter 18 of Matthew's gospel is this: how do we put out metaphorical fires in the family of faith, little fires and big conflagrations? How do we deal with someone who has lost the way, how do we deal with those who put down weak ones and little ones, what do we do when someone sins against us and then does not want to listen to our complaint? And today the question, Peter's question, is: how often do I have to forgive someone who sins against me, insults me, puts me down, hurts me? Seven times? Wouldn't that be quite enough?

Why seven times, where does Peter get that number? Biblical scholars point to an old story at the beginning of the book of Genesis, the story of Cain and Abel, the story of one brother killing the other in a fit of angry jealousy. And then the voice of God and the voice of conscience call out to Cain, call him out for what he has done, and tell him that he will now be *a*

fugitive and a wanderer on the earth (Gen 4:12). And when Cain cries out in anguish that being a fugitive will make him vulnerable to anyone who wants to kill him, God puts a protective mark on Cain so that no one who comes upon him would kill him, and God's voice indicates that *whoever kills Cain will suffer sevenfold vengeance* (Gen 4:15).

So here is the number seven, and sevenfold forgiveness is quite the opposite of sevenfold vengeance. We might think that Peter is doing well in envisioning the community around Jesus in a new and healthy way, based on Divine wisdom; that he is envisioning it in contrast to the larger society where everything is based on conventional wisdom. For that's a society where things are about retaliation and taking revenge, about getting even and using violence, about power and some people doing whatever they want. That's a scary world to live in for ordinary men, women and children who simply want to raise their families in peace, have enough food to put on the table, and pursue their trade and plant their gardens. And sevenfold forgiveness for those who sin or hurt or offend others would surely keep things calm and safe for all who are part of the Jesus movement and the early Christian faith community.

And yet: The apostle Paul, who is always real about what's going on in life and about what it's like when people of faith live together as a church, knows well that even good people quarrel about opinions (Rom 14:1). In our Epistle passage this morning, Paul acknowledges that people might judge others or even despise others for the things they do or the opinions they hold (Rom 14:4, 10). That's not so different from how we treat each other even today: As I read this passage to the Romans, it occurs to me that human beings and human behaviors haven't really changed much in 2000 years, from Ancient Near Eastern society and the early church until now.

And because the apostle Paul knows that people have different opinions and ways of looking at things and that they will likely quarrel about that, he steps right into a thorny issue for the church of his day, namely if there are any foods that one should not eat for religious reasons. And astute that he is, Paul reminds us that both sides of the debate about which foods to eat and which to avoid — and actually both sides of any debate— need to understand that both sides pray to God and give thanks to God (Rom 14:6), that both sides stand before God and are accountable before the judgement seat of God (Rom 14:10, 12).

So remember, Paul writes: we do live not to ourselves! Instead, whatever we do in terms of eating or not eating certain foods, whatever we say, however we behave: we live onto the Lord, we do it for the sake of our Lord, we do it to the glory of God. So respect one another's conscience and respect that all need to be fully convinced in their own minds (Rom 14:5). So remember that God is the judge of all and hence we shall not judge and despise others. That's how we live our lives, Paul writes, all our lives long, until our dying moment; that's our way of life.

A way of life emerges when we do something so often, so regularly, so habitually, that it becomes second nature. A way of life that is forgiving and kind emerges when we forgive so often that we lose track. Just imagine trying to count: how often did I forgive that church member, 33 or 34 times or was it only 32 times? And how about my annoying neighbor, I've forgiven her 47 times, wasn't that it? Jesus calls on Peter, the disciples, and on us now to forgive so often that we lose count and that the curse and brutality of Lamech are reversed; Lamech, a descendant of Cain mentioned in that same fourth chapter of Genesis, who arrogantly asserts that any offense against him shall be avenged seventy-sevenfold (*Gen 4:23-24*).

And there is the number 77, the number that Jesus mentions to overcome anger, vengeance, and violence and instead forgive; forgive so often that we lose track, forgive so often that it becomes a habit and part of our Christian character. For vengeance destroys lives, while forgiveness builds up lives, builds them back up, and builds up human relationships and builds up communities.

In the parable about the unforgiving servant (Matt 18:21-35), Jesus reminds us that forgiveness is to be offered out of humility when we reflect that we ourselves are forgiven by God, forgiven like the servant in Jesus' parable, forgiven an immeasurable amount. God's forgiveness is so vast and so all-encompassing that it revives and enlivens our souls and flows through us and flows out of us to touch others with forgiveness. And since God's forgiveness comes to us because of God's compassion and pity (*splanchnidzomai*, Matt 18:27) with us and with the whole human race, so we ourselves are called to show that same compassion and mercy (*eleesai*, Matt 18:33) to others.

One caution: if another person does not understand the need for forgiveness, and does not understand the dynamics and the sacrifice of forgiveness, and does not change, we may need to let that one be to us like a stranger or a tax collector, to use Jesus' words that we heard last Sunday (Matt 18:17). For the act of forgiveness is not meant to have the one who forgives further belittled, injured, and abused; rather, it is meant to establish new and healthy relationships that lead to wholeness and wellness for all parties involved.

Forgiveness is real and powerful, forgiveness is necessary if we want to be able to live in communities of peace and hope for the future, forgiveness is what our Lord Jesus Christ brings to all people of good will when they are gathered in his name.