

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditations in our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord our Rock and our Redeemer; Amen.

Interspersed among all the very funny moments in the movie, “Home Alone” are some extraordinary touching and poignant scenes. One such scene has the 8-year-old Kevin, seeing his very scary looking neighbor in church during an afternoon children’s Christmas choir practice. After having a brief panic attack and taking a deep breath, Kevin decides to take the risk of talking to the older gentleman. In the conversation Kevin learns that the old guy comes to children’s choir practice because it is the only time he gets to see his granddaughter. Being the curious kid that he is, Kevin asks why, and learns that his neighbor and son had a falling out 10 years ago and they haven’t talked since. Kevin innocently asks, ‘why don’t you call him?’

‘Because he won’t talk to me,’ painfully answers the gentleman.

‘How do you know,’ presses Kevin.

‘I don’t,’ comes the honest reply.

Kevin says a few words about his family and forgiveness, then he says, ‘you’ll never know until you try.’

That sums it up for so many of us. So many people live with broken relationships because they are unwilling to try, they are afraid to take the risk and make themselves vulnerable. Behind the older man’s pain and hurt is the fear of rejection, and the fear of opening up an old wound that hasn’t healed with the passing of time. Unfortunately, the only way to heal a wound is to open it up, clean out the dirt and the grim, and bandage it with care.

I don't think it's a coincidence that this gospel lesson comes on the heels of last weeks, which put front and center ways we deal with our brothers and sisters when we don't see eye to eye with them. And although it would be easier, the guidebook that Jesus gives us doesn't involve walking away, but instead has us being in conversation with them. It feels pretty obvious to me, then, knowing that we are human and we are going to fail, that following a guidebook on conflict comes a guidebook on forgiveness.

Peter comes to Jesus and says, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Now seven may seem like a random number to you, but if you know anything about the rabbinical law, you know that forgiving your brother or sister three times is considered sufficient. So, it seems in this question Peter is giving a lot of extra room for more than enough forgiveness. I imagine when Jesus responds, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." Peter is shocked. He can't believe his ears. How many, how many times Lord? And as if that's not enough, you know those 490 times he has to forgive, Jesus tells a parable that hammers home his point.

Now, keep in mind I'm terrible at math. But everywhere I looked when I was studying this parable I saw a math problem and as I started to do the math it boggled my mind, and I think the outrageousness of the numbers makes Jesus' point even stronger. The slave in the parable who is indebted to the king actually owes the king 2.782 billion dollars. Seriously, billions of dollars. How does someone who doesn't own his own body rack up that much debt? As I thought about that I can't help but wonder if the king set the slave up for failure.

And then, after the slave refuses to forgive another's debt as he had been forgiven, the king throws the slave into prison until the debt is paid. Now let's say the slave works for twenty-five cents an hour and he works forty hours a week. In a whole year he would only earn \$500.

That means it would take the slave 556, 400 years to pay off the debt. Clearly, that is obscene. Obviously the slave will never live that long, so what is the point of even saying it will happen? The slave just got a life sentence of torture.

Of all the things that happen to us in life, some of the absolutely most painful are that of estranged and broken relationships and they can feel like a life sentence of torture. All of us, without exception, know that pain. I have no doubt that at some point in each of our lives you have dealt with a broken relationship from someone you cared about or loved, perhaps maybe you still are, even now. And when I think about those relationships I also have no doubt you have valid reasons for your estrangement. In fact, I would even wager a bet that if you sat down over a cup of coffee with a friend and explained the reasons you no longer are getting along or no longer speak, the person sitting across from you would even agree with you! But, imagine this. What if Jesus was sitting across from you at that table in the coffee shop. Imagine you telling Jesus the reasons, those same reasons that you just told your friend. What would he say to you? Would Jesus take your side and say, “well done good and faithful servant?” Or would Jesus say to you, “THOSE are your reasons? They mean nothing. Get back out there and work it out!”

I think 8-year-old Kevin’s question, “Why don’t you call them?” is Jesus’ question of us. Our Lord wants us to heal these relationships, and he makes it possible for us through his example of grace and forgiveness. Broken relationships are nothing new. They go all the way back to the beginning of time with Adam and Eve. Remember they ate from the tree of good and evil. Remember God asked Adam what happened and how quick he was to shift the blame? Since that moment the blame game has been happening and broken and hurt relationships are the result. And that blame game can consume us. It can harden our hearts and not allow us to see in our neighbor the image of Christ in which they were created, and we too were created.

The issue in our gospel lesson is not how often we forgive or how much we are asked to forgive. Jesus us shows us with his own life, and reinforces for us with this parable today that forgiveness is limitless, without end. In God's kingdom forgiveness is not optional, it's not a choice, it's a way of life and happens without question. And that's precisely the issue before us today; Peter wants to make forgiveness a choice. We want to make it a choice. But as followers of Christ it isn't.

In a world where everything is quantitative it is difficult for us to imagine something is limitless. Let's be honest for a minute, how many of us right now in our heads could produce a list of people we refuse to forgive for one reason or another? Now, let me ask you the same question in a different way, how many of us can also produce a list of people who have refused to forgive us?

This being a follower of Christ is no joke. It's hard work. To truly forgive someone the way that Jesus has forgiven us is very, very difficult; almost impossible. But today Jesus reminds us that it is what he expects of us, and not just once or twice or even the standard three times, but seven times seven; and even more so in the parable, for over five hundred thousand years' worth of work. And do you know why? Because that's how often and how willingly and how graciously our God forgives us. And we depend on that every moment of every day.

So today I leave you with the question I started with, "Why don't you call him? Because you'll never know what will happen until you try." Heal those broken relationships. Clean out those wounds. Be open and accepting of forgiveness and give it just as abundantly as you receive it. With God's help. Amen.

