

“Four Hundred and Ninety Times” A sermon based on Genesis 50:15-21; Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35 delivered on Sunday, September 13, 2026 by the Rev. Alison Dutton Jacobs at the First Congregational UCC of Onekama, Michigan.

When Peter asked Jesus about forgiveness, he was as usual, a bit clueless. Looking for a human formula for forgiveness that he could follow. When Jesus answers him, he evokes the special biblical number seven and thus brings God into the solution. In the Bible, the number seven symbolizes completion, perfection, and divine order, appearing repeatedly to highlight God’s work and spiritual fulfillment. God’s work of creation was completed by the seventh day, the flood at Noah’s time began in seven days, Jacob worked seven years for Rachel’s hand and another seven years to make her his wife when Leah was substituted and on and on. Not counting the mentions of seventeen, seven and its multiples are mentioned 652 times in the Bible.

Peter suggests seven times, as a nice round biblical formula and Jesus answers with a multiple of that number. Scholars haven’t come to agreement whether it is “seventy-seven” times or “seventy times seven,” but the fact remains that Jesus was admonishing Peter that the times that one offers forgiveness is not a small, manageable number, but that forgiveness could be endless—even some 490 times!

In their work “The Book of Forgiving,” the late archbishop, Desmond Tutu and his daughter, Mpho, share stories of the art and difficulty of forgiveness. Desmond speaks of the abuse of his mother by his father and how each time he visualizes these tragic acts in his memory, he has to forgive his father each time. Forgiveness is not a one-time deal, it is a process that involves many, many steps—maybe even seventy times seven!

The wisdom of this important book is encapsulated in the following quote: “The only way to experience healing and peace, is to forgive. Until we forgive . . . we remain tethered to the person who harmed us. . . . when we forgive, . . . we become our own liberators. . . . We don’t forgive to help the other person. . . . We forgive for ourselves.” When Peter asks Jesus the question about forgiveness, he is thinking of the other person gaining something from that forgiveness. When Jesus tells the parable of the unmerciful servant, who turns around and treats his own debtor poorly, he is pointing out that forgiveness is not a human gift one to the other, but a divine spiritual practice that must come “from your heart.” (v. 35c)

When Joseph’s brothers realize in our Genesis passage this morning that the protection the presence of their father had afforded them while he was still alive was now eliminated at his death, they feared revenge and retribution from their brother.

Instead, what Joseph offers is divine spiritual forgiveness. The brothers come to Joseph with a made up “death bed statement” supposedly uttered by their father to make Joseph forgive them, but he is already way ahead of them. He comforts them with these words:

"Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. So have no fear; I myself will provide for you . . ."

This deeply kind forgiveness by Joseph is probably something he has had to cultivate over and over again, as throughout the years he has recalled his abandonment and fear. Maybe even seventy times seven (like the years of plenty and famine!)

While Paul's letter, addressed to a diverse group of believers in Rome, does not specifically mention forgiveness, it does speak of holding back the natural human tendency to judge others. In verse 10 Paul asks his readers: *"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."* We can almost hear Peter asking Jesus, "Why can't I judge my brother and sister? How many times do I have to forgive them for these bad actions?"

Just like we all replay the past harm and hurts that we have received and must seek to provide forgiveness each time, we also

must remember the times we have failed by judging others. Judging their actions as being somehow “unforgivable.”

The stark spiritual reality is something that Desmond and Mpho Tutu emphasize in the Introduction of their book on forgiving. On page 3, this statement is made: *“I would like to share with you two simple truths: there is nothing that cannot be forgiven, and there is no one undeserving of forgiveness.”* While not the same words as those of Jesus to Peter, the import of the two statements is the same. Peter wanted a measurable easy way out for the practice of forgiving, perhaps even with the preface “except in this situation, or only in that situation.” A call to forgive four hundred and ninety times, was surely not what Peter expected in answer!

Forgiveness, as Jesus reminds his disciples must “come from the heart.” It cannot be a rote, insincere expression made in order to fulfill some sort of behavioral norm. If our heart is not in it, if we still hold the grudge, and seek negative things for the other person, than our “forgiveness” is empty and false. Like all things that are on the spiritual plane of our lives, “lip-service” just doesn’t cut it!

Almost exactly twenty years ago, on October 2, 2006 a 32-year-old man took ten Amish girls hostage while they were doing their lessons at the West Nickel Mines School in Pennsylvania.

Charles Roberts shot 10 girls ages six to thirteen, killing five outright and a sixth who succumbed to her injuries 18 years later. The shooter died by suicide in the schoolhouse. The Amish community with its emphasis on forgiveness and reconciliation presented a model of what spiritual forgiveness really means in the aftermath of the shooting:

On the day of the shooting, a grandfather of one of the murdered Amish girls was heard warning some young relatives not to hate the killer, saying, "We must not think evil of this man".^[21] Another Amish father noted, "He had a mother and a wife and a soul and now he's standing before a just God".^[22] Jack Meyer, a member of the Brethren community living near the Amish in Lancaster County, explained: "I don't think there's anybody here that wants to do anything but forgive and not only reach out to those who have suffered a loss in that way but to reach out to the family of the man who committed these acts".^[21] A Roberts family spokesman said an Amish neighbor comforted the Roberts family hours after the shooting and extended forgiveness to them.^[23] Amish community members visited and comforted Roberts' widow, parents and parents-in-law. One Amish man held Roberts' sobbing father in his arms, reportedly for as long as an hour, to comfort him. The Amish also established a charitable fund for the family of the shooter.^[24] About 30 members of the Amish community attended Roberts' funeral. Marie Roberts, the widow of the killer, was one of the few outsiders invited to the funeral of one of the victims.^[25] Marie Roberts wrote an open letter to her Amish neighbors, thanking them for their forgiveness, grace, and mercy. She wrote, "Your love for our family has helped to provide the healing we so desperately need. Gifts you've given have touched our hearts in a way no words can describe. Your compassion has

reached beyond our family, beyond our community, and is changing our world, and for this we sincerely thank you.” (Wiki)

The response of the Amish Community to this terrible tragedy is the epitome of Jesus’ call for multiple actions of forgiveness. All the family members, the other children, the parents of the shooter, the Amish elders and their actions of love, caring, and heartfelt acceptance added up in that moment and then cumulatively over the ensuing years—perhaps to make up the total of four hundred and ninety times. Only our God knows. Amen.

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