Forgive! It doesn't work so well as a demand. Forgiveness is a gift which sometimes takes years and even decades to unwrap. Joseph found that out the hard way. His 11 brothers were jealous because Joseph was their father's favorite, so they took Joseph's beautiful coat, smeared it with blood so their father would think Joseph was dead, threw Joseph in a pit, then sold him into slavery. Joseph was hauled off to Egypt, where he was imprisoned. Joseph then found favor with Pharoah by interpreting Pharoah's dreams. Pharoah looked kindly upon Joseph and raised him up to be a wealthy and respected man. Fast forward many years. A severe famine has made it necessary for Joseph's brothers to travel to Egypt to buy the grain which Joseph has wisely stored up because of his vision of a seven- year drought. Eventually the brothers end up before Joseph. These men who had once planned to kill Joseph know that they are now at his mercy. The brothers beg Joseph to forgive them. They lie and tell Joseph that their father, on his deathbed, asked Joseph to forgive them, though their father was still alive.

A Hollywood ending would have Joseph locking up his brothers or even leaving them for dead as they left him. That must be what the brothers expect and it would be hard to find someone who wouldn't understand that kind of justice. But Joseph has healed during the years he has been separated from his family. He understands that what his brothers meant for evil, God has made good. After their father really dies, the brothers fear the retribution they surely deserve. But any resentment Joseph felt over the years falls away when he sees the opportunity for reunion with his family. “Am I in the place of God?” Joseph asks. “I will provide for you and your little ones.” And he does.

Forgiveness is a gift. It cannot be demanded or coerced from another. Forgiveness is made possible through an abundance of grace on the part of the giver. It grants its recipients new life and heals shattered relationships. For all the good that forgiveness makes possible, it can be extremely difficult to give or receive. That's what Peter is getting at when he asks Jesus how many times he should forgive someone who does him wrong. Peter knows the rabbis teach that one should forgive an enemy three times, so he pads that number, thinking he will impress Jesus with his willingness to go beyond what even the rabbis require. “Should I forgive someone seven times,?” Peter asks. Imagine his disappointment when Jesus tells him, “No, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.” Some translations even have Jesus saying “seventy **times** seven” times. This forgiveness business is tough stuff. Jesus' disciples hear just how tough it is when he tells them the parable of the king who wants to settle accounts with his slaves. The king ends up forgiving one of his slaves an enormous debt, which in our currency would be something like 150,00 years worth of the slave's wages, or around $31 million. That slave, who could never pay what he owes the king, turns around and demands another slave repay a debt he owes the first slave, which is about $8000. When the second slave cannot come up with the money, the first sends him to prison. It would be hard for anyone who hears Jesus' story to miss the point. How can someone who is released from an exorbitant, crippling debt not forgive the one who owes him a tiny fraction of that amount? Jesus says that first slave, forgiven for his enormous debt is punished because he cannot forgive the second slave.

Matthew has a way of ending his accounts about Jesus with warnings and this one is no different. At the end of today's parable, Jesus tells his disciples that they will face severe repurcussions if they do not forgive others as they have been forgiven. I think this interpretation of Jesus' parable comes from Matthew and probably not from Jesus. Remember, as was true in last week's gospel, in Matthew, Jesus is speaking with his disciples before his death and resurrection and those make all the difference in the world. On the cross, Jesus has made the ultimate sacrifice for our sins and in him our debts have been forgiven. We have done nothing to earn or deserve this forgiveness.

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As Martin Luther reminds us, where forgiveness of sins occurs there is also life and salvation. But forgiveness is tough. The toughest part for us to comprehend is that God would even want to forgive us of the many ways we have wronged God and one another. God not only wants to forgive us, God works out our salvation through the body and blood of God's only son. This is radical grace that invites us to a new way of life. God has relieved every one of us of a debt we could never repay. It is only because of this extravagant gift that we could ever begin to imagine forgiving someone who has hurt us.

Forgiveness is a gift. It is tough and sometimes it takes years or even decades to unwrap. Several years ago, I attended a conference for pastors of many different faith communities. A speaker told the story of a life blown apart by the hurt done to her by another person. One pastor stood up and asked the speaker, “Have you forgiven the one who hurt you?” The speaker seemed a bit rattled and replied, “No, I haven't been able to forgive. I do pray that it will happen one day but that day has not yet come.” The pastor told her, “You have to forgive. You have to do it now, today. Let's all stand and pray that you can do it right now.” Another pastor stood and said, “No. Don't force her to do anything. The ability to forgive is in God's hands and we can only pray that she will receive that gift one day.” A lively discussion came out of the exchange and it was clear all the pastors were not of one mind about forgiveness. Some seemed to think forgiveness can be brought up from within us, on demand. “Forgive!” Others insisted that forgiveness is a gift and that the timing is in God's hands. Since that day, I have come to see forgiveness is a journey, a journey along which we discover the incredible love of God. As we unwrap this precious gift, we find that the complete forgiveness of our sins leads us, invites us, lures us to forgive those who hurt us. When we are able, through the grace of God, to forgive someone else, a burden is lifted from our shoulders. We find we can move forward with our lives; we are lighter as that burden is released. Sometimes relationships can be repaired. Sometimes they cannot or should not. In that wildly powerful journey of forgiveness, we appreciate even more what God has done for us and makes possible for us to do.

Forgiveness is a big deal. It's one of the cornerstones of our faith. Forgiveness is a gift that is difficult to understand, difficult to receive and difficult to give. It can take time, maybe a lifetime, to unwrap. Later in the service, we will pray to God to “forgive us as we forgive one another.” That translation of Jesus' words can be seen as a bit convoluted. If we are really asking God to show us the same level of forgiveness that we show one another, we are doomed. Maybe it is more helpful to hear Jesus' words this way, “Because you have forgiven us so extravagantly, please show us how to forgive others.” Forgiveness. It begins in the heart of God and expands until the whole universe vibrates with its energy, with the promise that comes from death to life in Jesus Christ, the one who embodies hope and new possibilities for us all.

Amen.